FEB. 15¢

THRILLING WESTERN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Riders OF THE Yucca Trail

An El Halcon Novel by BRADFORD SCOTT

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. XLIV, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION February, 1948

A Walt Slade Novel

RIDERS OF THE YUCCA TRAIL.....***Bradford Scott*** **13**
With blazing guns as his passport, the fighting Ranger known as El Halcon invades a stronghold of evil and combats conspiring outlaws!

Two Complete Novelets

THE BONANZA KING.....***Joseph Chadwick*** **56**
Cowboy Jim Parrish looked like just another hobo—but when he went to Copperville he quickly demonstrated that he didn't act like one!

STEP-SONS OF DISASTER.....***Gunnison Steele*** **74**
To Johnny Buck, cruelty and injustice are a call to action that must be heeded promptly—in spite of any dangers that might be involved!

Short Stories

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Again man's best friend gives proof of stalwart loyalty and courage

FROG LEGS, AND THEN SOME.....***Ben Frank*** **46**
Gus Givens gets mixed up with critters who can do some fast jumpin'

BULLET TITLE TO HELL.....***Burl Tuttle*** **90**
Aunt Martha's cookie jar packs more power than an owlhooter's hate

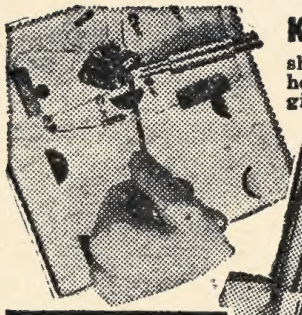
GUNSMOKE'S HAPPY NEW YEAR.....***Johnston McCulley*** **95**
The merry tune of wedding bells is almost drowned out by gun roar!

Features

THE HITCHING RAIL.....***Buck Benson*** **6**
A meeting-place for range riders—plus announcements and letters

HOW WELL DO YUH KNOW YORE WEST?.....***Quiz Feature*** **55**
Here are five more questions tuh test yore knowledge of the range

Thrilling Western, published monthly by Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entire contents copyrighted, 1947, by Standard Magazines, Inc. Subscription, yearly, $1.80; single copies, $.15; foreign postage extra. Re-entered as second class matter January 22, 1946, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Printed in the U. S. A



KIT 1 (left) I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio Soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.

KIT 2 (left) Early in my course I show you how to build this N. R. I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.

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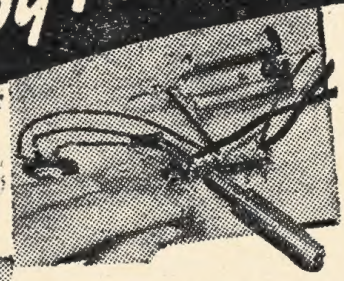
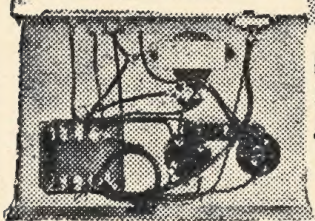
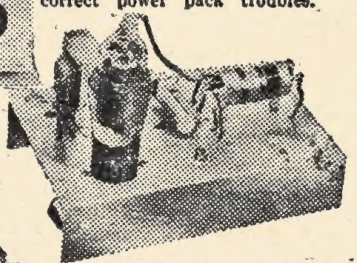


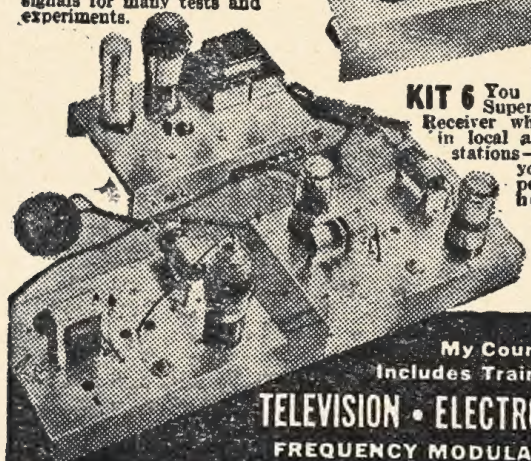
KIT 3 You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



KIT 5 Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



KIT 6 You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

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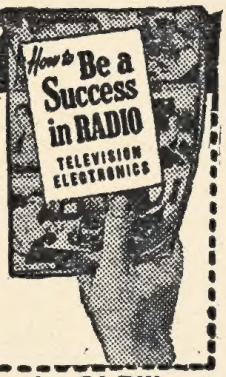

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The HITCHING Rail

A Department for Readers Conducted by BUCK BENSON

SO YOU want to know the name o' the tree-shrubs you saw growin' in such thick forests along the Southern Pacific railroad through Texas. Yo're right, there's no growth like that in the eastern part o' the United States. The trees, with their pretty wax-like, dark green foliage, sort o' like fern fronds in shape, grow so thick in places in the Southwest it's jest about impossible to find cattle that graze in the forest.

That plant is the famous Mesquite o' song and story, fellow. Didn't you ever sit around a camp fire after somebody had walked up with an armful o' mesquite branches and tossed 'em on the blaze? If you did, you've never forgot the delightful, pungent odor. Sure makes a camp fire seem romantic like, and puts everybody in a frame o' mind to start singin' songs.

That Homesick Feeling

After a rain on the desert the air is apt to be sweet with the odor o' mesquite. Sure can make you feel homesick jest to hear somebody talkin' about it, if you've lived on a ranch or any where in the rangeland. Makes you remember the girls you used to ride with and pop the question to, though maybe you haven't seen or thought of 'em for many years.

You saw, even from the train, as you passed through the country how thick those jungles o' mesquite have grown. Probably you didn't notice that the grass under the trees is not so thick, nor so long, as it used to grow. Truth o' the matter is it's gettin' thinner and shorter every year, and ranch folks are gettin' plumb scared about the situation.

Now the delight o' every cattleman's heart is *Tall Grass.* They say the words with longin' and admiration. Back in the beginnin' o' the cattle business in the West the prairies were covered with tall, green grasses, so tall and thick they fairly rippled in waves, like fields o' wheat.

There was the blue-stem spear grass, and several varieties o' grama, like the "harry" and "sidecoat" grama, and others that grew tall and thick and lush. Cattle fattened pronto and kept in wonderful condition on tall grasses.

Growin' Too Fast

This old mesquite growth is sure comin' in for a heap o' criticism all over the rangeland. It's growin' too fast and spreadin' over good grass lands, crowdin' out the staff o' life for cattle. In fact, it's become one o' the major problems o' the cattle country. Now-a-days every cow man is talkin' about how to get rid o' mesquite so'se the tall grass will grow again.

It's a powerful big proposition, for the cost o' riddin' acre upon acre, mile after mile o' mesquite is a mighty expensive undertakin'.

The smaller brush can be chopped down, rather "grubbed", without too much trouble, but the expense o' hirin' labor is almost prohibitive now, besides, you couldn't find enough men willin' to work at it if you had a whole mint o' money.

Then, too, the live roots left in the ground —and there's always some left—will sprout up again, come spring, when you've got to start wrastlin' 'em again. 'Course, you could run a bulldozer over the land and uproot the mesquite, but the cost is prohibitive.

So, ranchers and the experts are puttin' their heads together to solve the problem o' mesquite eradication. They've admitted

(Continued on page 8)

To those who think LEARNING MUSIC is hard . . .

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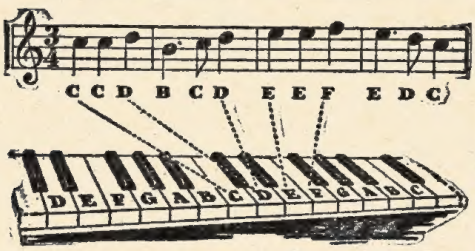

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

that the task of uprootin' the jungles is impossible. Then what about poison? Somethin' that'll kill the mesquite without harmin' other desirable growths? Workin' with that idea, they experimented with a number o' poisons. Today they're puttin' their faith in kerosene oil, at least until somethin' better is found to do the job.

Kerosene will do it, and it's cheap enough to be practical. The oil has to be applied to the roots o' the mesquite plant; sprayin' trunks and branches won't do it, they've found. Some run a small-bore iron pipe into the earth at the base o' the plant, then pour in the kerosene. Others claim all that's necessary is to pour the oil around the base o' the tree and it will find its own way down to the roots.

Like I said, mesquite is sure a big problem when it comes to eradication, and the cattle folks say, romantic or not, the pest has got to go.

First Longhorn Cattle

Now then, we gotta be gettin' on with this here tall pile o' inquiries what's been comin' in while we chewed the fat. Here's one wantin' to know how the first longhorn cattle ever got to Texas.

"Was the longhorn a native o' our West? If not, who shipped the great horned animals to Texas?" Sylvester Jenkins o' Tuscaloosa, Alabama wants to know.

Nope, Mister Longhorn wasn't a native o' Texas or any part o' North America, Sylvester. It's common knowledge that the longhorned critters come to the Southwestern part o' the United States from Spain with the Conquistadores, way back in the 16th century when they conquered Mexico.

Men o' science—archaeologists and the like—tell us the longhorn wasn't a native o' Spain, however. Seems to o' been from some

(Continued on page 10)

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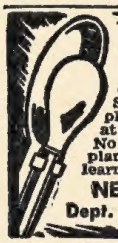

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 8)

Asiatic country. Excavations in Turkestan has revealed the remains o' some longhorn cattle there, buried hundreds o' years ago, under many layers o' soil. These archaeologists claim the longhorned type o' cattle was the first ever to be domesticated.

A Horn o' Plenty

Seems there was once a society o' hard drinkin' hombres formed way back in the middle ages, and the fraternity used the long horns o' cattle for drinkin' vessels. One o' the boys was said to possess a horn six-and-a-half foot long, and holdin' three and a half quarts o' liquor. Drinkin' from that joyful horn-o'-plenty must o' been quite a stunt.

From a historical and sentimental standpoint it seems a shame that the great longhorn has practically disappeared from our western scene. They were clumsy beasts, though, at best. No good in brushy country because o' their great length o' horn. And the meat o' the longhorn steer didn't no ways measure up to our fine, juicy beefsteaks o' today's cattle.

Shipping Fever

Now then, here's Tom Worth o' Amarillo, Texas with a question about the cattle disease called "Shipping Fever." Tom has inherited a cattle ranch in the state o' New Mexico recent, from a rancher uncle, and he hopes to become a bonafide cattleman jest as soon as he's through college.

Good luck to you, Tom. I'm envyin' you with all my heart, son. Sure wish I was young and good lookin' and jest startin' out again.

I'm sympathizin' with you a little, too, for you've sure got a heap to learn. The business o' ranchin' ain't as easy and romantic as it sounds. If I was in yore shoes I'd take me a course in Animal Husbandry while I was learnin' all about Shakespeare and Napoleon in that school.

Yessuh, Shippin' fever, or "Stockyards fever," is well-known and plenty dreaded among stockmen. Did you ever see a cow critter with a ragin' fever? Their temperatures range from a hundred and four to a hundred and eight degrees Fahrenheit.

(Continued on page 108)

What Strange Powers Did The Ancients Possess?

EVERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

Much has been written about the wise men of old. A popular fallacy has it that their secrets of personal power and successful living were lost to the world. Knowledge of nature's laws, accumulated through the ages, is never lost. At times the great truths possessed by the sages were hidden from unscrupulous men in high places, but never destroyed.

Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

Fundamental Laws of Nature

Your habits, accomplishments and weaknesses are the effects of causes. Your thoughts and actions are governed by fundamental laws. Example: The law of compensation is as fundamental as the laws of breathing, eating and sleeping. All fixed laws of nature are as fascinating to study as they are vital to understand for success in life.

You can learn to find and follow every basic law of life. You can begin at any time to discover a whole new world of interesting truths. You can start at once to awaken your inner powers of self-understanding and self-advancement. You can learn from one of the world's oldest institutions, first known in America in 1694. Enjoying the high regard of hundreds of leaders, thinkers and teachers, the order is known as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Its complete name is the "Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis," abbreviated by the initials "AMORC." The teachings of the Order are not sold, for it is not a commercial organization, nor is it a religious sect. It is a nonprofit fraternity, a brotherhood in the true sense.

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Sincere men and women, in search of the truth —those who wish to fit in with the ways of the world—are invited to write for a complimentary copy of the sealed booklet, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how to contact the librarian of the archives of AMORC for this rare knowledge. This booklet is not intended for general distribution; nor is it sent without request. It is therefore suggested that you write for your copy to Scribe J. M. B.

The ROSICRUCIANS
[AMORC]
San Jose California

TOM STOPPED THE RUNAWAY AND THEN . . .

WATCHED BY HER DAD AND A PASSERBY, "BABS" WEBB IS GIVING HER FAVORITE TROTTER HIS MORNING WORKOUT WHEN . . .

STEADY, JEB!

JUMP, BABS!

THE FEAR-CRAZED ANIMAL SNAPS A REIN AND GALLOPS BLINDLY AT THE FENCE

WHOA, BOY! IT'S ALL OVER

WHEW! THAT WAS CLOSE. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, BABS?

YES, THANKS TO MISTER . . .

TOM ADAM'S MY NAME. JUST DRIVING THROUGH

LUNCH? YOU'RE VERY KIND, BUT I'M HARDLY PRESENTABLE. BEEN DRIVING SINCE MIDNIGHT AND . . .

YOU CAN CLEAN UP AT THE CLUB. COME ON

AND HERE'S MY RAZOR

THIS BLADE'S A SWEETHEART! MY FACE FEELS GREAT!

TOUGH WHISKERS ARE NO PROBLEM FOR THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

I WISH YOU COULD SEE ME DRIVE IN THE CLUB HANDICAP THIS SATURDAY

HE'S CERTAINLY HANDSOME

SATURDAY? TRY AND KEEP ME AWAY!

YOU'LL FIND SHAVING IS QUICKER, EASIER AND MORE REFRESHING WITH **THIN GILLETTES. NO OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADE IS SO KEEN AND SO LONG LASTING.** AND, FURTHERMORE, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATION AND DISCOMFORT CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES BECAUSE EVERY THIN GILLETTE IS MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. TO GET REAL SHAVING SATISFACTION . . . **USE THIN GILLETTES**

The lamp, held high, revealed a corpse lying in the dust

Riders of the Yucca Trail

By BRADFORD SCOTT

With blazing guns as his passport, the fighting Ranger known as El Halcon invades a Chisos stronghold of evil and trades bullet for bullet with conspiring outlaws!

CHAPTER I

Lawmen A-Plenty

NORTHWARD from the awful gorge that bounds the Texas Big Bend country on the south, a trail slithers like a crippled snake toward the blue mystery of the Chisos Mountains. It was an old trail when the Spaniard first set foot on Texan soil. Old when the Aztecs flowed south by way of it in quest of empire. Old when the first moccasined foot paddled over it. Old, doubtless, when beetle-browed, crooked-boned men with low, curving skulls slunk along it, glancing fearfully into the depths of the rank growth that

festered under a red sun. For it is the trail of a gateway to the north.

Over parched desert and arid flat it winds. Through canyon and gorge. In the shadow of towering mountain walls. Along the verge of dizzy precipices. Over it, like swung censers, sway great clusters of the lily-white blossoms that give its name—the yuccas, ghost flowers of the desert, lost dwellers from spirit-land, thriving amid desolation and death.

Along the Yucca Trail, his back to the gorge of the Rio Grande, the westering sun etching his sternly handsome hawk profile in flame, a tall and broad-shouldered man rode a magnificent black horse. The black butts of heavy black guns, snugging in carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters swung from double cartridge belts, flared out from his sinewy hips.

Across his shoulders, held in place by a silken thong, was a small guitar in a waterproof case. His dress was the homely and efficient garb of the range-land—faded overalls, batwing chaps, soft blue shirt with vivid neckerchief at the throat, well-worn, high-heeled boots of softly tanned leather, broad-brimmed, dimpled "J.B." cuffed over one eye, worn with knightly grace.

As he rode he sang in a rich, deep, and amazingly musical voice. His laughing, reckless eyes of clear gray looked gaily out upon the world, and found it good. The grin quirkings at the corners of his rather wide mouth somewhat relieved the tinge of fierceness evinced by the prominent hawk nose and the long, powerful chin and jaw.

Thus, with the blue of the Texas sky above him, and the gold of the sunset desert at his feet, rode Walt Slade, named by the peons of the River villages, *El Halcon*—The Hawk!

AHEAD, the trail curved sharply around a swelling cliff that was the vanguard of increasingly higher hills that walled the north, with the single narrow gap that was the portal of the Yucca Trail slashing the beetling front.

Slade rounded the cliff, and abruptly straightened in his saddle. Riding toward him at top speed were close to a dozen men in a compact group. The foremost was a burly individual with broad shoulders, deep chest and abnormally long arms. He had a round, ruddy and good-humored-looking face dominated by snapping black eyes, and crisp, curly black hair. His mouth was wide and hard set. He wore regulation range garb and forked his big bay with the careless grace of a lifetime in the saddle.

Slade noted that he carried two guns and that a rifle butt projected from the saddle boot beneath his left thigh. On his sagging vest gleamed a big nickel star with "Deputy Sheriff" engraved on its face.

The group pulled to a halt at sight of Slade and sat their horses, tense and watchful as he drew near. The big man waved a hand.

"Howdy, cowboy!" he called in a jovial voice. "See anythin'of a bunch of scallywags foggin' it south?"

"I cut into this trail from the west, just a couple of miles back," Slade replied as Shadow his horse ambled to a standstill.

The deputy nodded. "Reckon they was ahead of yuh, then," he replied. "They'd ought to be mebbe a hour ahead of us. Come on, boys, hightail. We'll catch 'em yet."

Suddenly he fixed his glittering gaze on Slade's face.

"Yuh say yuh didn't meet anybody on the west trail?"

Slade shook his head.

"Ride it quite a piece?"

"Good many miles," the Hawk admitted.

The other man nodded, gathered up his reins, and spoke to his horse.

"*Adios*," he said. "See yuh in town when we get back, if yuh're headed that way."

With his grimly silent followers pounding along after him, he swept past the Hawk with another friendly wave of his hand and vanished around the bulge.

Slade gazed speculatively at the settling cloud of dust that marked the passing of the group.

"Well," he told Shadow, "that was as salty a stragglin' of lawmen as I ever looked at. Reckon the jiggers they're after are in for a lively time if they

catch 'em up. Well, let's go, feller. Quite a mite to go yet before we hit that town of Chino they told us about over west. Shore could stand a helpin' of chuck about now. If my stomach didn't hear me talkin' to you, it would figger my mouth has been sewed shut. Reckon you could stand a chawin' of oats or somethin' else solid. Grass is all right,

WALT SLADE

but I've a notion it don't stick to the ribs. June along, hoss, we got places to go."

The trail climbed into the hills, poured through a notch and wound along the edge of a dizzy precipice that walled a narrow canyon that, Slade could see, turned sharply to the west and bored its way through the range for an unknown distance. The floor of the gorge was heavily brush-grown, with a swift stream of dark water washing the base of the near wall, and perhaps fifty feet below the surface of the trail.

Slade had ridden for perhaps half an hour with the dizzy precipice on one side and the craggy mountain wall on the other when again he heard the beat of fast hoofs drawing toward him. Another moment and around a bent swept a second hard riding group.

"Blazes!" he muttered. "Has there a cage busted somewheres?"

The second group, about equal in number to the first, was headed by a lanky, cold-eyed old man with a drooping mustache. A silver shield gleamed on his shirt front and bore the legend "Sheriff" embossed in gold on its surface.

The group pulled to a slithering halt and eyed the approaching horseman. Slade pulled up within a dozen feet of them and returned their gaze.

"Where'd you come from, cowboy?" the sheriff asked in harsh tones, eyeing Slade with scant favor.

"I don't ask yuh where you came from," the Hawk drawled easy reply.

THE SHERIFF stiffened, apparently started to make a tart answer, then evidently changed his mind.

"Reckon the question was out of order," he admitted. "I was figgerin' mebbe yuh noted a bunch of hellions skalleyhootin' south?"

"Can't say for shore," *El Halcon* returned. "Did meet some hard-ridin' gents who said they were lookin' for some jiggers headin' south. One of 'em wore a deputy's badge."

The sheriff's eyes widened. He seemed to breathe with difficulty.

"Just—just what did that badge-wearin' hellion look like?" he asked.

Slade described the jovial, curly-haired man. The sheriff let loose an appalling flood of profanity. Slade listened admiringly.

"Curly Bill Edwards!" bawled the sheriff. "He would pull somethin' like that! The nerve of that ringtailed sidewinder! Just let me line sights with him! Just once!"

"Feller done somethin' wrong?" Slade asked mildly.

The sheriff seemed on the verge of apoplexy. "You tryin' to be funny?" he bellowed.

Slade struggled with a grin. The sheriff's followers also appeared to be afflicted by some emotion that reddened their faces and sparkled their eyes.

"I was just askin' for information," Slade replied, his voice serious, but his eyes dancing. The sheriff's rage did have a mirth provoking side.

"If holdin' up a stage-coach and killin' the driver is wrong, he did," the sheriff informed, his voice ominously quiet. "Yuh say that outfit was headed south?"

The suspicion of laughter left *El Halcon's* eyes. They were suddenly as serious as his voice. He gave, in precise detail, an account of his meeting with the group masquerading as a sheriff's posse. The sheriff nodded quietly, appeared to consider. He looked Slade up and down.

"It's a wonder they didn't do for yuh," he said, "seein' as they'd know yuh'd meet us and give us the lowdown on which way they was headin'."

His gaze rested on the heavy guns flaring out from *El Halcon's* sinewy hips, shifted to the slim, quiet, capable-looking hands that seemed never far away from the plain black butts of the guns.

"Reckon they would have, if they hadn't figgered it would be considerable of a chore, and one they might not enjoy before they finished with it," he said. "They was headed south, yuh say?"

"That's right," Slade replied. Suddenly he recalled the last question the curly-haired man had shot at him as the group got under way. "Seemed interested in the trail to the west," he added. "Asked me if I'd met anybody on it."

But the sheriff shook his head.

"They wouldn't turn off," he declared with conviction. "They'll head south for the river and the ford. Let's go, boys!"

The posse rode on, swiftly gathering speed. Slade shook his black head, and spoke to Shadow.

CHAPTER II

El Halcon!

THE SUN sank in scarlet and gold behind the western crags. Purple shadows brimmed the canyon. The cliff tops glowed briefly with reflected light, then dimmed and grayed.

But not for long. A full moon soared up from the east and tipped them with frosty silver. The moon was high in the sky when the hills fell away, and Slade saw a wide valley walled by tall hills misty with distance.

The Yucca Trail dipped sharply downward, following a long slope that leveled off to the valley floor some two miles distant. Perhaps three miles farther on he could make out a cluster of winking sparks that doubtless marked the site of the cow and mining town, Chino, for which he was heading.

"Stir the dust, Shadow," he told the black, "or we'll be late for supper."

Shadow snorted response and quickened his pace. They reached the valley floor, where the trail wound between clumps of growth and considerable groves.

"Fine range land," the Hawk mused. "Grass nigh onto belly high. Looks like there's plenty of water, too. Reckon that crik over there is the same one that runs through the canyon."

They passed through a wide grove where the shadows lay black beneath the trees, cleared a final straggle of growth. Slade pulled up and gazed across

The three horsemen, with shouts of anger, whirled to stare into the unwavering muzzles of two long, black guns

the rolling rangeland to a big, imposing-looking house built in a heavy Spanish style.

"Quite a *casa,*" he mused, surveying with a cattleman's appreciative eye the tight barns, bunkhouse, and other buildings that flanked the manse. "Figger the gent who squats there must be pretty well heeled with dinero."

Passing the ranchhouse he rode on across fertile rangeland on which grazed plenty of fat beefs. The valley, he judged, was some forty miles long by perhaps two-thirds of that in width, one of the great oasis regions come upon frequently in the heart of the desert and mountain country of the Big Bend.

The cluster of lights ahead resolved into a huddle of buildings. Soon he was riding through the straggling outskirts of the town. He passed along a shadowy side street and could hear the hum of the town's main thoroughfare immediately ahead.

Abruptly he heard something else—a crackle of shots, a wild yelling and a pound of approaching hoofs. He quickened Shadow's pace and a moment later reached where the side street turned into another that was wider and much better lighted.

Up the street, whooping and yelling, rode three horsemen. A taut rope stretched back from the saddle-horn of the rearmost rider. The far end of the rope was looped around the body of a man who bounded forward frantically to keep from being jerked from his feet. Even as Slade stared at the unusual sight, the victim lost his footing and pitched headlong into the dust.

Instantly the rope tautened. A series of piercing howls arose and the unfortunate was dragged through the dust and over the ruts. The horsemen swept past the mouth of the wide street, whooping exultantly.

Walt Slade's right hand flashed down and up. There was a spurt of fire, the sullen boom of his heavy Colt. The victim, his painful progress abruptly interrupted, sprawled in the street, screeching with pain and fright. Over him tangled the coils of the severed rope.

The three horsemen, with shouts of anger, whirled their horses "on a dime," to face Slade. Their hands dropped. Then they stiffened, tense and motionless. They were staring into the black muzzles, one still wisping smoke, of two long black guns. And back of those unwavering muzzles were the towering form and icy gray eyes of *El Halcon.*

Slade broke the silence. "What's the notion?" he called harshly. "Want to kill that jigger?"

An angry shout answered him.

"What the blazes do yuh mean hornin' in on somethin' that don't concern yuh?" demanded the wiry, sandy-haired individual whose face bore a red welt, seared there by the back-lash of the severed rope that still dangled from his saddle-horn.

"Reckon such carryin's-on is anybody's concern," Slade replied quietly. "I ask yuh again—what's the notion?"

"He's one of the Dad-blasted Peralta outfit, and he was told to stay out of town!" bawled a beefy, fat-faced cowboy who rode next to the sandy-haired man. "And if yuh didn't have the drop on us, I'd—*Yowp!*"

THE THREAT ended in a yelp of alarm as Slade's hands moved with flickering speed. But only to slide the big guns back into their sheaths. Empty-handed, he faced the three horsemen.

"Haven't got the drop on yuh now," he observed, his voice silkily soft but edged with a steely promise.

The fat cowboy stared, his mouth hanging ajar. He opened and closed his hands nervously, glanced sideways at his companions. It was the sandy-haired man who snapped the tension.

"Lay off, Snide," he advised his companion. "Yuh'd have about as much chance with this gent as a terrapin climbin' a slick log. Mebbe we were goin' a mite strong"—he nodded to Slade—"but that hellion was warned. We didn't aim to do him in—just figgered to drag him out of town and turn him loose."

The victim of the attack had meanwhile freed himself from the rope and struggled to his feet. He was scratched and bleeding, but otherwise appeared little the worse for his experience. Now, his black eyes sparkling with rage and hate, he burst into a torrent of Spanish invective directed at his tormentors.

"Cinch up," Slade advised him. "You ain't damaged much, and cussin' won't help matters."

But the man was not easily appeased. He shook his fist at the horsemen.

"Why you no draw the gun now?" he taunted in imperfect English. "Why you no draw the gun on *El Halcon!*"

The speaker forgotten, the three cowboys stared at Slade.

"Whe-e-ew!" whistled the sandy-haired man. "And I was figgerin' on takin' a chance and reachin'!"

The fat puncher shook his bristly head. "I'd have took a chance, if a hunk of dust hadn't got in my eye just then," he mumbled.

"Uh-huh," snorted the sandy-haired cowboy, "and then yuh'd have had dust in both eyes, only yuh wouldn't have noticed it. *El Halcon!*"

Slade, an amused light in his gray eyes, fished the "makin's" from his shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand. From the tail of his eyes he noted the Mexican slide across the street and disappear into a dark opening between two buildings.

The three cowboys were meanwhile regarding him with lively interest. The sandy-haired man spoke.

"My name's Price—Walsh Price," he announced. "The jigger packin' the tallow and the big-medicine mouth is Snide Perkins. The talkative gent the other side of me is Tom Ord. We ride for the Slash K."

Slade smiled acknowledgment. "Reckon yuh know my handle," he remarked.

"Uh-huh, we know it," admitted Price. "Who in Texas don't? Yuh look to be a regular feller, despite the things we've heard about yuh. Glad to know yuh, Slade."

"We was just figgerin' to stop off at the Headlight saloon for a chuck when we got arguin' with that Mexican," the previously silent Ord observed, adding diffidently, "If yuh'd like to join us—"

"That's the best thing I've heard yuh say yet," Slade applauded. "And how about a seat for my hoss?"

"Good stable right around the next corner," said Price. "We'll show the way. Usually leave our cayuses there. Say, what became of the Mexican?"

"Slid out of sight a minute ago," Slade replied. "Reckon he figgered some place was better than here."

"He figgered right," Price grunted. "Not that I've got anythin' against Mexicans in particular—lots of 'em are first-rate jiggers—but one of the Peralta outfit!" A muttered oath finished the observation.

SLADE glanced inquiringly at the speaker, but Price did not see fit to amplify his remarks.

The stable proved satisfactory. Right across the street was a small rooming house patronized by cowmen, and here Slade obtained a sleeping room in which he deposited his guitar and other gear. Then, in company of Price and his companions, he repaired to the Headlight, which proved to be a big combination saloon and eating house. The group found a table and gave their orders.

"Uh-huh, it's fine rangeland," Price answered a question from Slade. "I figger there ain't no better cattle country in Texas than what the Big Bend provides, in spots. This valley is one of 'em, and one of the best. Most folks who live here have been here a long time, some of 'em all their lives, with their dads born here before 'em. There's a couple of good payin' mines in the hills over east, too. Uh-huh, a fine section, or used to be."

Slade glanced inquiringly at the speaker, but Price was glooming into his glass and said nothing more. His companions also had abruptly become morose. Slade rolled a cigarette and waited for them to break silence.

Suddenly the swinging doors banged open and a man strode into the room, glancing keenly about. With hardly an instant's hesitation, he headed across the room for the table occupied by Slade and his companions. Slade got an impression of steely slenderness topped by wide shoulders and a deep chest, the slenderness of a finely-tempered rapier blade.

The man's face was also arresting. It was cameolike in the regularity of its features that were set off by flashing blue eyes and tawny hair. At the moment the finely-featured face was set in hard lines of vindictive anger that tightened the rather full lips and

brought a touch of color to the ordinarily somewhat swarthy complexion.

In height the man was somewhat more than six feet, with long arms and powerful-looking hands. He was dressed in somber black, relieved only by the snow of his ruffled shirt front. At his hip swung a heavy gun.

Within arm's length of the table the man paused, glaring at its occupants. His voice rang out, hard, metallic, singularly clear and penetrating.

"Price," he said, "I told you once before about making trouble for my hands!"

There was an implied threat in the statement, a threat that acted on the sandy-haired cowboy like a goad on a bull. With a roar of rage he surged to his feet.

"Cuss yuh, Peralta," he bellowed. "I'll—"

Peralta hit him, with both hands, and hard. Price was fairly lifted off his feet. He crashed into the table, and over it went with a crackle and bang of smashed crockery.

CHAPTER III

A Fightin' Man

WALT SLADE, sliding from his chair in a lithe ripple of motion, alone escaped the universal ruin. "Snide" Perkins was flat on his back, a bowl of stew gumming his bristly hair. Tom Ord, drenched with steaming coffee, was on his hands and knees, floundering about like a disjointed frog. Price, partially dazed by the terrific punch he had taken on the jaw, flopped and writhed, trying to coordinate his numbed muscles.

Perkins and Ord came to their feet, yelling curses. Peralta leaped forward, swinging with both hands. Perkins took one squarely in the mouth and his falling body smashed what was left of the table into kindling wood. Ord managed to get in one blow that staggered Peralta, then caught a long left on the cheekbone and landed beside Perkins.

Walsh Price had managed to sit up. He seized a heavy bowl and hurled it at Peralta. It caromed off his shoulder and grazed his jaw, starting a trickle of blood. Peralta swore viciously, his hand flashed down and up. The black muzzle of his gun lined with Price's breast. But just as he pulled trigger, Walt Slade's fingers coiled around his wrist like rods of nickel steel, jerking the gun barrel aside.

The bullet fanned Price's face with its lethal breath. Peralta gave a yell of pain as Slade's grip ground his wrist bones together. The gun fell from his numbed hand and thudded to the floor. Writhing about, he swung a blow at Slade's face.

Before it had traveled six inches it was blocked. At the same instant, something like the slim, steely face of a sledge-hammer smacked against Peralta's jaw with the sound of a butcher's cleaver slamming a side of beef. Slade let go his wrist simultaneously and Peralta shot through the air and thudded to the floor.

Slade's eye caught a flicker of steel on the far side of the room and he went sideward and down. A long knife buzzed through the air and thudded against the far wall, to stand quivering and shimmering in the boards.

Slade drew in a flicker of movement and shot from the hip. The knife thrower, a thick-set, swarthy man, who had drawn a gun with his left hand, went reeling back, clutching at his blood-spouting arm. As Slade's barrel lined with him a second time, he whirled about, plunged through a back door and vanished.

Snide Perkins, spitting blood, teeth and curses, scrambled to his feet, gripping a table leg. With a sputtering howl he leaped toward the prostrate form of Peralta, whirling up his clubbed weapon. But Slade surged erect at the same instant. The point of his shoulder caught Perkins in the chest. Snide sat down again, hard.

"Stay where yuh are, while yuh're still able to set up," Slade told him.

A gun in each hand, Slade swept the room with their muzzles. However, nobody else appeared to be looking for trouble. Men were under tables, crouched behind posts, hugging the wall. The long bar was astonishingly empty. From the bartenders squatting beneath

its protection came yells of, "Stop it!"

Peralta sat up, looking dazed. He cast an almost wondering glance at Slade, shook his head as if in disbelief, and got slowly to his feet. All the fight in him had evidently evaporated. Slade slanted a glance toward the disheveled Slash K cowboys, who were also standing up and looking like they too had plenty.

"I don't know what this is all about," the Hawk said, "but I figger it's gone far enough. Peralta, that's yore name, I believe, get out of here. Price, you and the boys mosey over to that table by the wall and mop up. Tell the waiter to bring us somethin' more to eat. All right, get goin', all of yuh."

Peralta gave him a long stare, shrugged his shoulders, picked up his fallen gun, which he jammed into its holster, and strode, rather unsteadily, to the door. In the opening he paused a moment, favored Slade with another stare that was intensively speculating, and vanished.

The Slash K boys slouched over to the designated table and sat down. Men sidled back to the bar or to their games. The barkeeps bobbed into view like jacks-in-a-box. Slade holstered his guns and joined the punchers at the table. He alone bore no marks of conflict. He chuckled as he surveyed his companions.

SNIDE PERKINS had a badly cut mouth and was minus two teeth. Tom Ord had a black eye and a swelling nose. Price boasted a lump the size of an egg on the side of his jaw. He grimaced with pain as he essayed speech.

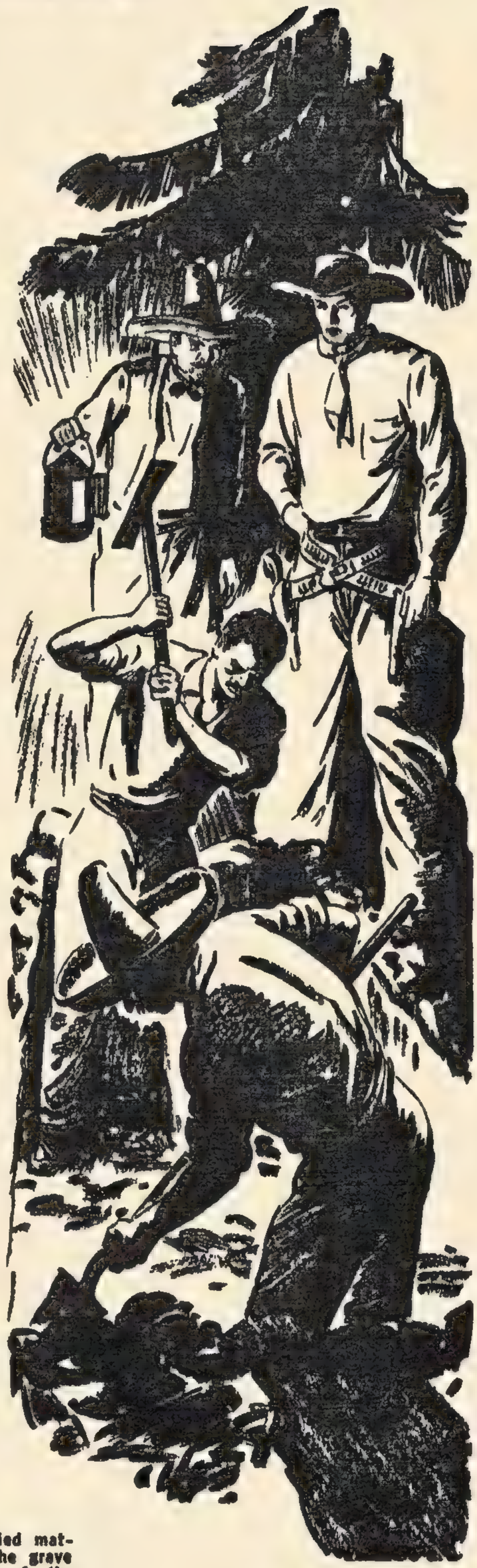
"Well," he said, with a ghost of a grin, "no matter what yuh say about that yaller-haired horned toad, he's a fightin' man!"

Slade rolled and lighted a cigarette.

"Now," he said, "suppose you gents tell me what this is all about. I don't mind gettin' into the middle of a shindig, when necessary, but I do like to know what all the shootin's for."

The Slash K punchers glanced at one another.

"You tell him, Walsh," suggested Ord.



Two fearful peons plied mattock and spade on the grave under the direction of the alcalde and Walt Slade

"I reckon yuh're the best talker."

"To begin with, Manuel Peralta is a no-good sidewinder," remarked Price.

"Rather a matter of personal opinion, usually," Slade commented. "Why?"

"Old Sebastian Peralta, his uncle, lived here in the valley for fifty years and got along fine with everybody," Price replied obliquely. "Don Sebastian died year before last and Manuel has had the whole section by the ears ever since. Yuh see, it was this way:

"Don Sebastian bought the spread known as the Snake S from another old jigger way back in Eighteen-sixty-seven. Don Sebastian was a real young feller then. The other jigger, named Gomez, got title by way of an old Spanish grant, a title the courts upheld, like they've done lots of times.

"Well, that was all right. When Don Sebastian first took over, there wasn't hardly anybody lived in the valley. But later on folks began driftin' in and takin' over the open range. Don Sebastian was a good neighbor and everybody liked him. The valley got prosperous, a couple of mines were opened over east, Chino built up into considerable of a town and everything was hunky-dory.

"Don Sebastian originally came from *manana* land, from a little village called Jacinto, about seventy miles south of the Rio Grande. He had relatives down there. One of 'em was his brother's kid, Manuel Peralta. About two years back Manuel came to live with Don Sebastian. He got along purty well with folks, although he was always a mite uppity. The Peraltas are high-grade Spanish stock, yuh know. No Injun blood, like with so many others.

"Then last year Don Sebastian got a hankerin' to go back and see his old stampin' grounds, Jacinto, where he hadn't coiled his twine for better'n fifty years. So he and Manuel and his old cook and a few other hands set out for *Mejico*. On the way, Don Sebastian managed to get himself pitched off his hoss onto his head and cashed in. They buried him in Jacinto, all in good order.

"Manuel brought back a death and burial certificate signed by the *alcalde*—mayor—of Jacinto, and by the local *medico*. Don Sebastian's will named Manuel his heir. All of which was all right. But Manuel, in the course of the will probatin' business, got to snoopin' around in the old records over to the courthouse. He hit on somethin'. Seems the old land grant to Gomez ceded him the whole Gomez Valley, instead of the section that is the Snake S. Savvy?"

"Yes"—Slade nodded—"but the Peraltas could not claim the valley on the grounds of the old grant. Their claim could only be laid to what they bought from Gomez."

"Uh-huh," admitted Price, "but there's the catch. The deed from Gomez to Sebastian Peralta, properly signed and witnessed, showed that Gomez deeded Peralta the whole tract covered by the old grant, which was all of Gomez Valley."

"But why," Slade asked, "didn't this come to light durin' the lifetime of Don Sebastian?"

"That," replied Price, "is somethin' never plumb satisfactorily explained, though the court accepted what most folks agreed was a reasonable explanation. Yuh see, Don Sebastian was a sociable gent and liked folks. The section he used for his Snake Spread was all the land he had any need of—the best land in the valley. He was glad to see folks come in.

"He was a regular hombre, and old-timers say that when a new outfit landed in the valley, he used to send his hands to help 'em get located, build a ranch-house, and so on, and always had 'em up to his big *casa* for a house warmin'. It was called to mind by old-timers that he welcomed newcomers as if they were comin' in as his guests."

WALT SLADE nodded understandingly.

"And at that time, the land was worth very little," he commented.

"That's right," Price agreed. "Don Sebastian lived comfortable and didn't want much. Never had a hankerin' to get richer than he was. It was purty well brought out in the court proceedin's that he was plumb satisfied with his life. I reckon he never even give the terms of the old grant much thought. And as the years went by, he come to look on other folks in the valley as the real owners of the land."

Slade nodded. He could understand this attitude on the part of a patriarchal *hidalgo* of the old school. Don Sebastian, a true Spanish gentleman, would never have entertained the notion of collecting payment from his "guests" who came and relieved his loneliness with their welcome presence. Also, he could understand how young Manuel Peralta, ambitious, holding more modern business notions, and perhaps naturally avaricious, would entertain altogether different views.

"Well," continued Price, "the thing was fought out in court, and the lower court decided in favor of Manuel Peralta. Which made every spread owner in the valley, the mine owners over east, and the property owners here in town nothin' much better than ordinary nesters."

"And tenants of the Peralta estate," Slade added.

"That's right," Price admitted. "And folks don't take too kind to the notion," he added grimly.

"Any talk of appealin' the case to the higher courts?" Slade asked.

"Uh-huh," Price replied, "but them things cost money, heaps of it, and besides, some of the best lawyers in the state say that the old deed from Gomez to Peralta is plumb foolproof and that an appeal would be just a waste of money. And of course the land grant had already been upheld."

Slade nodded again. "That's plumb usual," he said. "It's happened plenty of times. In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in Eighteen-forty-eight, the United States agreed to recognize all former land titles, such as the old grants. That established a precedent upon which the courts based their decisions. The only point in dispute would be the authenticity of the deed from Gomez to Peralta."

"And the lawyer sharps say the deed is cinched up tight," Price repeated. "So Peralta is bringin' suits to collect back rent, and so on. It'll just about bust a heap of folks if he wins judgments, which it looks like he will. Reckon he's plumb shore of winnin', all right. He lives in style and is swallerforkin' over most of seven counties. Feller, it's a fine mess!"

CHAPTER IV

Drygulcher

SLADE smoked thoughtfully for several moments. Suddenly he shot a question at Price.

"What about Curly Bill Edwards?"

The cowboy started. His eyes narrowed a trifle.

"Curly Bill ain't no help," he stated slowly. "He used to operate over New Mexico way and south of the Border. Of late he's moved over into the Big Bend country and has been raisin' Hades and shovin' a chunk under a corner. Sheriff Lake Blevins is out chasin' him right now. Last night he held up the stage from McCarty, the railroad town to the south of here, cashed in the driver and headed south with a nice haul. Pulled the chore almost in sight of town.

"The shotgun guard, bad hurt, managed to cut loose one of the stage hosses and make it to town. Reckon Curly figgered him dead or he would have done for him, too. Sheriff Blevins figgered he had Curly this time. He telegraphed to McCarty and had a posse waitin' down to the south pass waitin' for Curly. He set some of his own men on guard at the Yucca Trail so Curly couldn't double back and get out of the valley that way, and there ain't no other ways out.

"But Curly didn't show up at the south pass or at the Yucca either. Blevins had another bunch of special deputies trailin' south after Curly, and they didn't see hide or hair of him. But this afternoon a prospector reported seein' a bunch he figgered was Curly and his sidewinders headin' south on the Yucca. Blevins was fit to be tied. He'd pulled his men away from the Yucca early in the afternoon. How Curly managed to keep out of sight and make it to the Yucca is somethin' to figger on. He's a smart hombre, all right."

Slade, recalling his own recent encounter with Curly Bill and his bunch, audaciously posing as peace officers on the trail, nodded agreement, and his mouth set in grim lines. *El Halcon* did not take kindly to being outsmarted.

Price regarded him thoughtfully, seemed to hesitate, then abruptly made up his mind.

"Yuh made a bad enemy tonight, feller," he said. "Peralta ain't the sort to take kind to a manhandlin'."

"Oh, I reckon he won't be too prod-minded because of a punch on the jaw," Slade replied easily.

"Don't be too shore," Price disagreed. "I've a notion he ain't used to packin' a lickin'. And he's got a salty bunch workin' for him. Must have been one of his hands buzzed that knife at yuh. I didn't get a good look at the sidewinder before he ducked out and can't say for shore."

"I've a notion that one got a plenty that will hold him for a spell," Slade said. "A forty-five slug through the arm ain't easy to take."

Price nodded, as though but partly convinced. "Well, reckon it's about time to hit the hay," he announced, rising to his feet. "I've had about all the excitement I crave for one day."

"Good notion," Slade agreed. "Didn't get much sleep last night. Could stand a mite of ear poundin' myself."

The other Slash K hands did not object and the party left the table. They were just passing the open back door, Price slightly in the lead, when Slade shot out a long arm and swept the cowboy clean off his feet. In the same movement he bounded convulsively to one side.

The room rocked to the crashing double roar of a shotgun. Fire streamed through the door opening. Buckshot screamed past so close that it fanned Slade's face. Ord yelled with pain as a stray pellet nicked his ear.

Both Slade's guns let go with a crackling boom. The slugs screeched through the door opening, thudded into the jamb. Slade bounded forward, weaving and ducking. He reached the door, slewed sideward through it, hugging the building wall. He was in a dark and narrow alley that backed the Headlight.

Flame gushed from the darkness. A bullet smacked into the wall. Slade fired at the flash, raking the alley from side to side, leaped back and crouched low against the wall. Somewhere in the darkness he could hear a queer tapping, as of boot heels beating a tattoo upon the ground. The noise quickly ceased and all was quiet save for the pandemonium of yells and curses inside the saloon.

SLADE slid a little to one side, peering and listening. He straightened cautiously, thumped his boot solidly against the ground, and instantly changed position. Nothing happened. He holstered one gun and stepped forward. In the murking edge of the radiance streaming through the door, he could just make out a still form huddled on the ground. He took another cautious step toward it. There was neither sound nor movement.

Men were peering out the door. An instant later, Walsh Price came shouldering boldly through the crowd, gun in hand.

"Bring a light!" Slade called to him.

One was forthcoming in a moment—a bracket lamp from the wall. Price held it high. Its flame revealed a man's body lying on his back in the dust. His glazing eyes stared upward from his swarthy face. Around his left arm a handkerchief was bound.

"It's that sidewinder who flung the knife!" whooped Price. "He won't fling another! Yuh drilled him dead center this time, Slade. Look, there's his shotgun over there, and here's his six. Didn't I tell yuh to watch out for Peralta?"

"Nothing to tie Peralta up with this," Slade demurred. "Remember, I gunned this jigger. Reckon he may have figgered he had a pretty strong personal reason for wantin' to even up the score."

"Mebbe," grunted Price, "but I still got my own notions."

The dead man was carried into the saloon and laid on the floor. Contrary to his expectations, Price was forced to admit that he did not recognize him as one of the Snake S hands. Nor could anyone else recall seeing him with the Peralta outfit.

"Ain't even got a Mexican look about him," said Ord, peering closely at the swarthy face. "Heap of Injun blood, though, I'd say."

"Got an Apache look to him," hazarded Price. "See them cheekbones, and that nose. Face almighty broad, too."

"Not many 'Paches left in Texas,"

somebody remarked. "Most of 'em over Arizona and New Mexico way. What'll we do with the hellion?"

"Lug him into the back room and cover him with a blanket," said the fat and mustached proprietor of the Headlight. "Reckon the sheriff and Doc Potter will want to hold a inquest over the horned toad."

Slade took the dead man's shoulders and Price his feet. With the proprietor waddling after them, they carried him into the back room and deposited him in a corner.

"Shut the door and keep the crowd out," Slade told the saloonkeeper. "I'd like to give him a closer once-over."

The man's clothing was regulation range garb, with nothing to distinguish it. His gun, and the shotgun, which Price had brought along, were ordinary, of standard make and usual caliber. Nor did his pockets reveal anything of interest.

Slade was about to give over the search when his hand felt something bulky under the man's shirt. He investigated and, a moment later, drew forth a plump money-belt which disgorged a shower of shiny twenty-dollar gold pieces.

"Whe-e-ew!" whistled Price. "Look at all the dinero! The hellion shore must have made a killin' recent. He never got all them yaller boys at forty per, that's shore for certain."

Slade counted the money, and handed it to the saloonkeeper.

"Put it in the safe and turn it over to the sheriff," he suggested. "By the way, if I was you two fellers, I wouldn't talk about this. The sheriff might want it kept sort of under cover till he gets a line on where it come from."

The advice was received with solemn nods by his two companions. The Headlight proprietor cached the gold in his safe, which stood in a corner of the room, and covered the body with a blanket.

"Well," said Slade, "suppose we make another try for bed?"

"I'm agreeable," replied Price. "I shore have had all the excitement I crave today. Let's get under the blankets and cover up our heads, before somethin' else busts loose. . . ."

THE coroner's jury, the following morning, held Slade justified in the shooting of the unrecognized drygulcher, and said he had done a "good chore." Sheriff Blevins, returned from his fruitless pursuit of "Curly Bill" Edwards and his bunch, and undoubtedly in a bad temper, called Slade aside after the coroner's court adjourned.

"Come over to my office," he said. "Like to have a talk with yuh."

Slade offered no objection and the sheriff led the way to his office. Seated behind his table desk, he regarded the Hawk from cold blue eyes.

"Well," he remarked at length, "I changed my mind after I left yuh on the Yucca yesterday and took the west trail instead of headin' on south. It was a cold steer."

Slade nodded, apparently not surprised. "Yes, I figgered later that I'd been outsmarted," he admitted. "Reckon

[*Turn page*]

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(Adv.)

that hellion put the notion in my head, figgerin' I'd pass it on."

"Somebody was outsmarted, all right," the sheriff said significantly. "By the way, what yuh doin' in this section, anyhow?"

"Oh, just sort of ridin' through," Slade replied easily.

The sheriff snorted. "Wouldn't be a bad notion if yuh kept right on ridin', now," he suggested. "I got enough trouble on my hands, with Curly Bill and his bunch. I can get along without *El Halcon.*"

Slade smiled slightly. "Mebbe," he admitted, "and then again, mebbe not."

The sheriff stared at him, was about to make a reply, when a rumbling of hoofs and a bleating of steers drew both men's gaze to the window.

CHAPTER V

Message of the Dead

OUTSIDE the office a big herd of prime cattle was dusting past, shoved along by a number of *vaqueros* and cowboys.

"Another Snake S bunch headed for Peralta's spread," grunted the sheriff. "Old Don Sebastian shore must have had a passel of dinero cached in his *casa.* That makes the third bunch of fancy stuff brought in by Manuel in the past month. Reckon the old man would turn over in his grave if he knew the way that young hellion is throwin' his money around. Shore is livin' in style. Has a bunch of servants to wait on him. Fired Don Sebastian's major domo, and his old cook who, I reckon, didn't know anythin' much but how to boil frijoles and bake tortillas.

"Got a new feller he calls a chef, who cooks him fancy dishes. Takes a trip to the capital, or up to Dallas, ever so often, to go on a bust. He shore is ridin' high and handsome. Reckon he can afford it, though, when he starts collectin' rents from everybody in the valley."

"Yuh figger he'll win his suits, then?"

"Don't see how he can fail up," growled the sheriff. "The court decided in his favor in the Gomez deed suit, and everythin' hinges on that. The talk of appealin' to the higher courts has about petered out since the boys heard what the lawyers over to the capital had to say about the Gomez deed. Reckon they figger it would be just a waste of money."

Slade nodded, his black brows drawn together. On his face was the expression of one who struggles with memory.

"I sort of recollect a case somethin' like it over in Arizona some years back," he remarked, in a musing voice. "A jigger by the name of Jim Reavis brought forward just that sort of a claim. That case ended sort of different, though."

"How?" the sheriff asked indifferently.

"Reaves went to jail, for fraud," Slade replied. "By the way, yuh say Peralta fired his old cook? The one who rode to Jacinto with him and Don Sebastian?"

"That's right." The sheriff nodded. "The old feller elected to stay down there, I reckon. Anyhow, he didn't come back with the rest of 'em. Manuel got his new one not long after he got back and took over. The major domo is still here. Works for Rafferty of the Lazy J. He ain't so old as the cook, who was about Don Sebastian's age, I reckon—past seventy."

Slade looked thoughtful. He smoked in silence for some moments.

"Curly Bill and his bunch make much of a haul?" he asked suddenly. The sheriff shot him a suspicious glance.

"Why yuh want to know?" he asked. "Uh-huh, they did, a gold coin shipment to the Chino bank. Payroll for the mines over east, among other things."

Slade looked even more thoughtful. He shot another sudden question at the sheriff.

"Seen the owner of the Headlight Saloon today?"

"Not yet," replied the sheriff. "Tubby sleeps late. Expect to have a talk with him tonight. He figgered it wasn't necessary for him to be at the inquest, seein' as he was up all night. Why?"

"Oh, he's got somethin' for yuh," Slade replied. "Somethin' yuh'll mebbe find interestin'."

The sheriff looked curious, but Slade did not see fit to amplify his statement.

Instead, he stood up, towering over the old peace officer, who was himself six feet and more. He stretched his long arms over his head.

"Think I'll take a little ride," he announced.

"Fine notion!" the sheriff applauded. "Be shore yuh make it a little one," he added sarcastically. "Say across the Border or somethin' like that."

THE sheriff would have been surprised could he have followed Slade along the Yucca Trail and learned that he actually did descend into the gorge of the Rio Grande, ford the Grand River and ride swiftly southward across the mountains of Mexico. He would have doubtless been even more surprised, and more than a little curious, could he have divined *El Halcon's* destination—the little village of Jacinto, the ancestral home of the Peraltas since the days of the Spanish King. He would have perhaps been a trifle disgruntled at the warmth of the reception Slade enjoyed from the *alcalde* of the village.

"*El Halcon!* The friend of the lowly!" exclaimed the old mayor when Slade, dusty and travel-stained, entered his little office. "*Capitán,* what brings you here? I am pleased, greatly pleased, and honored. Come with me to my home. The poor best I have to offer is yours!"

Slade enjoyed a good clean-up and an excellent dinner with the *alcalde.* Over wine and *cigarillos,* he broached the reason for his long ride.

"Don Sebastian Peralta?" repeated the alcalde. "*Si,* he lies buried here in our little churchyard, where lie the bones of his father and his grandfather and others of the Peraltas. His was a sad homecoming, although to us who reside here now, he was but a name. His body came to the home of his ancestors, but his soul had departed. Thrown from his horse and his head broken across. He who, it is said, was the most daring and skilled of *caballeros* in his youth.

"An old man, wrinkled of face, white of hair. Little to remind one, doubtless, of the fiery youth who departed to the great land to the north, more than half a century ago, to seek fortune. Now he lies in peace beneath the pines. May naught disturb it."

"Senor," Slade said gently, "I come to disturb that peace."

The mayor stared. "*Maledicto!*" he breathed. "What mean you, *Capitán*?"

In a few terse sentences, Slade explained his mission. The mayor furtively crossed himself.

"To disturb the rest of the dead is a fearful thing, *Capitán,*" he said, "but if it is the wish of *El Halcon,* it shall be done. *Si,* I can obtain men who are to be trusted. . . ."

The wind sighed mournfully through the pines which drooped their needled branches over the grave of Don Sebastian Peralta. Patches of moonlight moved and altered shape as the branches waved, like restless souls emerged from the tombs to breathe the clean night air once more. The old church cast its black shadow athwart the grave and the figures that toiled by the light of carefully shaded lanterns.

Two fearful peons plied mattock and spade under the direction of the *alcalde* and Walt Slade. Finally they uncovered the plain coffin, which was raised to the surface. With difficulty the rusted screws were drawn, the lid of the coffin lifted and the pitiful remains of its occupant revealed.

The *alcalde* shivered. The peons furtively crossed themselves, and muttered prayers for the repose of the dead. Walt Slade bent low over the coffin and held the lantern close. He gazed long and earnestly at the skull, beneath which lay the long white hair of the dead man.

The temporal bone, he noted, was shattered, as if by a heavy blow. With reverent fingers he detached the skull and lifted it from its resting place. As he gazed at it and turned it over in his slim fingers, his eyes began to glow with an exultant light. He turned to the *alcalde.*

"Senor," he said, "I have heard that Don Sebastian Peralta was of pure Castilian blood."

"*Si,*" replied the official. "Of the old strain, without taint or stain."

"With none of the *Indio?*"

"None!" the alcalde declared emphatically.

Slade nodded. With gentle fingers, he wrapped the skull in a clean white handkerchief.

"I take this with me," he told the mayor. "Fear not, I will return it to its resting place. It goes on an errand of justice."

The *alcalde* bowed his head. He spoke with earnest conviction:

"If *El Halcon* says it, it is so. . . ."

JUST three days later, Sheriff Blevins looked up from his desk and gave vent to a disgusted snort.

"Might have knowed my luck wouldn't hold!" he growled. "So yuh're back again! Now what yuh want?"

Walt Slade, powdered with dust and looking rather weary, but with his gray eyes gaily adance, sat down, uninvited, and smiled across at the sheriff.

"What do I want?" he repeated. "I want yuh to get me an old record book from the courthouse, the one containin' the Gomez-Peralta land deed. Yuh can figger that, can't yuh?"

"Why should I?" the sheriff growled suspiciously. "What yuh cookin' up now?"

Slade had been fumbling at a cleverly concealed pocket in his broad leather belt. He laid something on the table between them.

The sheriff stared, slack-jawed, at the object, a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle, the honored badge of the Texas Rangers!

"Jumpin' jitterin' sand toads!" he exploded. "Yuh mean to tell me yuh're a Ranger!"

"Figger to be," Slade returned composedly. "Yes, undercover man for McNelty's company. Captain Jim sent me over to see what I could do about Curly Bill Edwards and his bunch. I ran into somethin' I didn't count on."

The sheriff's eyes snapped.

"The Peralta business!" he exclaimed. "Yuh mean yuh figger there's somethin' funny about that?"

"I don't know," Slade admitted frankly, "but there's been a lot of funny things happenin' hereabouts of late, and another one or two wouldn't surprise me much. You can get me that book?"

"I'll get it tomorrer," the sheriff promised. "Yuh're in luck as to that book. All the records relative to the Gomez grant and the deed to Peralta were subpoenaed for the trial and brought over from the capital, the book you want among them. They're still at the courthouse, awaitin' the decision whether to appeal. Yes, I'll get it for yuh tomorrow."

"What's the best and quickest way to get to McCarty, the railroad town?" Slade asked.

"Yuh can go by the way of the valley," replied the sheriff. "But the quickest way is the Yucca Trail, turnin' off to the left just the other side of the hills and follerin' the trail along their base. That's the old trail prospectors used before the railroad come.

"By the way," he added, "I saw Tubby over to the Headlight Saloon. He handed me them gold pieces yuh took off that drygulchin' sidewinder that night. Of course, I can't say for shore—no way of identifyin' 'em—but I got a notion them yaller boys were part of the haul Curly Bill took off the McCarty stage. That shipment was all new stuff, and so were the ones the sidewinder had in his belt. Looks like he might have been one of Edwards' bunch. Wonder how come he was left behind when the rest of 'em hightailed south?"

"That's a question I hope to answer before long," Slade replied grimly. "And," he added, "the answer may plumb surprise yuh."

The sheriff shot him an inquiring look, but Slade changed the subject.

"I'm headin' for bed," he said, standing up. "See yuh in the mornin'."

CHAPTER VI

From The Printed Page

LEISURELY, Slade rode the Yucca Trail the following afternoon. In his saddle-bag reposed the old record book containing the Gomez-Peralta land deed. He was in a gay mood and laughed and joked with his horse, in the manner of men who ride much alone.

Perhaps he would have felt less assured had he known that, at a discreet distance in the rear, a furtive horseman paced him along the winding Yucca, and afterward on the old track that curved

the base of the hills to McCarty.

It was dark when the Hawk arrived in McCarty, but he at once repaired to the office of the little weekly newspaper the town boasted. He found the editor, an old-time printer, still at his desk. He introduced himself and stated his mission.

"You see, suh," he explained as he laid the record book on the editor's desk, "the Reavis land steal in Arizona was exposed by a printer who discovered that the paper on which the form was printed bore a water mark that showed the sheet was manufactured a long time after the deed was drawn."

"Well," grunted the old editor, fingering the deed, "you won't expose one by way of this paper. It's just the same as the rest of the book. I figger it's mebbe a hundred years old."

"Just playin' a hunch," Slade said. "Sometimes they don't work out."

"More often they don't than they do," the editor replied pessimistically.

He fingered the crackling, parchment-like page, mechanically reading over the printed form as he spoke. Suddenly he leaned forward, peering at the black letters. He took off his glasses, polished them, replaced them on his nose and again peered closely.

Leaning back, he jerked open a drawer of his desk, rummaged about and produced a small magnifying glass. He squinted through it, tracing words and letters with a forefinger, mumbling to himself. He leaned back, laid down the magnifying glass and stared at Slade with eyes blazing with excitement.

"Son," he exclaimed, "you did play a straight hunch, after all!"

"Find somethin'?" Slade inquired eagerly. "That paper mean somethin' after all?"

"Not the paper, not the paper," exclaimed the editor. "It's the printing! The printing! Look, don't you see it? This form is printed in a style of Barth type that has been in use only a few years. A type cast by a machine invented by Henry Barth of Chicago. Wait, I'll show you."

He dived across the room and drew a ponderous tome from a bookcase. He rapidly thumbed over the leaves, which were lined with samples of various styles of type. Suddenly he paused, his finger on a line.

"Look!" he barked eagerly. "Compare this with the printing on that leaf. See the marked characteristics, the peculiar turn of the letters. Almost the same as those on the other leaves, yes, but not quite, not quite! A difference that is plain as day to one versed in such matters. This deed is dated Eighteen-sixty-seven, years and years before the style of type in which it is printed was first run. Wrong? I can't be wrong! I am versed in the elements of my business, young man, and I know what I am talking about. I tell you this deed is a fake."

Slade looked decidedly pleased, but he did not altogether share the editor's enthusiasm.

"It's tying up a loose end fine," he said, "but I've got a notion it is a thing over which experts might wrangle and give different opinions. At the best, it would be liable to mean a long and expensive court fight. But it does bear out my hunch. I know where to drop my loop now, and I hope soon to be able to twirl my twine. Yuh've helped a lot, suh. Just keep all this under cover for a spell. I'll call on yuh when I need yuh."

"Do that," replied the editor. "I'll be glad to testify in court, any time, and you'll quickly see my conclusions irrefutably verified by other experts. We'll put the rascal behind bars."

"I'm not thinkin' of bars where he's concerned," Slade countered grimly. "I'm thinkin' of a rope with a seven-turn knot at the end of it!"

Engrossed in their conversation, neither Slade nor the editor noted the dark face that showed for a fleeting instant outside the open window. . . .

SLADE headed back for Chino the following morning. His eyes were dark with thought and he talked little with Shadow as the Yucca Trail flowed upward before him through the hills. From time to time he wondered what would be the verdict on the carefully packed and wrapped parcel he had dispatched to the Professor of Comparative Anatomy and Craniology at the State University. The contents of the telegram

he awaited from the professor would go a long way toward confirming the theory he had evolved.

"But I still won't have an airtight case," he mused, gazing abstractedly at the hurrying black water at the foot of the cliff to which the trail clung. "If a killin' was done, the chances are it was on Mexican soil, and so far I haven't got a bit of proof that one was done. If there were killin's, as I've a notion there were, I'm still more in the dark. The only thing to do is lay a trap for the hellion, and that won't be an easy chore."

Slade was jolted from his abstraction by a sudden sharp clicking sound. Glancing back the way he had come, he saw, several hundred yards distant, a group of riders careening around a bend into view. Even as he gazed at them with interest, a sound of exultant yelling reached his ears. From the group mushroomed a puff of whitish smoke. A bullet whined through the air over his head.

"So," the Hawk muttered, tightening his grip on the reins, "somebody wants to play tag, eh? Let's go, Shadow!"

The great black shot forward. Slade glanced back coolly at the whooping pursuers. He was more interested and amused than alarmed, confident as he was in Shadow's great speed and endurance. Barring a chance lucky shot, and the distance was too great for that danger to be pressing, he had little doubt as to the outcome.

"Looks like somebody has been keepin' a pretty close watch on me," he mused. "Wonder how much they caught on to? Or are they just playin' a hunch that I'd better be got out of the way on general principles?"

With little apparent effort, Shadow drew away from the following horsemen. Slade keenly eyed the trail ahead, hoping for some spot where he might hole up and make it hot for the pursuit. They sloped around a bend, cleared the bulge of the cliff. With a grip of iron, Slade jerked Shadow to a clashing halt.

Sitting their horses less than a hundred yards ahead were four men in an attitude of grim waiting. Foremost was a bulky, florid-faced individual whom Slade recognized as the man he had met posing as a deputy sheriff some days before, the man Sheriff Blevins declared was Curly Bill Edwards.

A shout of exultation greeted Slade's appearance. Guns were drawn with a flash of metal. Without an instant's hesitation, he whirled Shadow and sent him careening back around the bend amid a storm of passing lead. He was untouched, but as he cleared the bulge, he saw his pursuers charging up the trail but a few hundred yards distant.

From around the bend came a thudding of hoofs as Curly Bill and his men got under way. Slade's hands flashed to his guns, but dropped away again. To attempt to shoot it out with the converging groups was rank madness; he was hopelessly outnumbered.

At his back was the cliff face. In front was the sheer drop of fifty feet or more to the hurrying black water that washed its base. From north and south the whooping owlhoots thundered in for the kill.

There was just one thing to do, one slender chance, life or death dependent on the depth of the water at the cliff base. Slade's voice rang out:

"Take it, Shadow! Take it!"

Shadow took it, squealing protest. Far out over the edge of the trail he launched his great body, into empty air. Down he rushed, the wind of his passing streaming his glorious black mane upward like a flaunting banner. He struck the water with a prodigious splash. Horse and rider vanished beneath the surface.

Down, down, they went, until Slade thought they would never rise again. He felt Shadow's irons strike bottom as he slid from the saddle. They began to rise, slowly. The current gripped them as with a mighty hand and hurled them downstream. Slade's lungs were bursting when they at last broke surface, rolling over and over. He gripped Shadow's mane with all his strength and grimly held on.

FROM the trail above sounded yells and a thunder blast of shots. Bullets spatted the water all around the struggling pair; but the angle was not good for shooting. Another moment and they passed through another storm of lead. Then they were past the second group

of riders and hurtling downstream at mill-race speed.

Instinctively Slade fought to reach the far bank, but he quickly realized that he was only wasting his strength. The current was too strong to breast. His body was becoming numb from the bite of the icy water. He was gasping with effort. The shoreline flickered past in a dim blur.

The gorge began to bend. From almost due south it turned to a westerly direction, and immediately it narrowed, narrowed until the black water washed the cliff base at either side, with no encroaching strip of beach. The stream roared hollowly between the towering walls, and the current seemed to increase in power. Slade could hear Shadow gasping and groaning. The black horse was in a bad way, numbed by the icy water, battered by the surging current.

Slade's own strength was nearly exhausted. Once he lost his grip on Shadow's mane and recovered it by a frantic grab as the heavier body of the horse forged ahead.

The canyon widened somewhat. It was perhaps two hundred yards in width, but the water still seethed against perpendicular stone walls on either side. Abruptly, however, it seemed to Slade that the current was somewhat losing its power. He strained his head up and peered forward. He essayed an exultant cry that came out as an exhausted croak.

Directly ahead was an island that split the stream in two. It was perhaps sixty yards in width and of unknown length. Straight toward its shelving edge the current hurled horse and man. A moment more and Shadow's irons scraped bottom. Slade hauled himself up by the horse's mane until he gained a footing.

Together they sloshed through the shallows, to sink utterly exhausted on a little strip of pebbly beach.

NEXT MONTH

WILD MEN OF WALLOWA

A Swap and Whopper Novelet

By SYL MacDOWELL

CHAPTER VII

"Dead Man's" Story

FOR a long time, man and horse lay motionless. The sun was high in the heavens and its rays, pouring into the gorge, gradually warmed their numbed bodies and drew the chill from their bones. Finally Slade sat up, rather shakily, and gazed about.

The island was thickly wooded. He could hear birds calling amid the branches. An occasional rustle in the undergrowth hinted at the passage of some small animal. He managed to draw off his boots and empty them. Then he essayed to wring as much water as possible from his clothes. He removed his belts and laid his guns to dry in the sun. He felt confident that the well-greased cartridges had not been damaged by the submergence.

Shadow got up enough spirit to roll a couple of times. He struggled to his feet, blew prodigiously, and gazed around. He was apparently little the worse for wear.

"It was touch and go for a while, feller," Slade told him. "But we managed to pull through. Now I wonder where we've got to? Looks like a game trail into the brush over there. Reckon we could do worse than see where it goes to."

With Shadow's bridle looped over his arm and walking rather stiffly, he followed the winding track which led through the thick brush. It straggled along for perhaps a couple of hundred yards and then entered a clearing thickly walled by tall brush. Slade paused, staring in astonishment.

At the far side of the clearing, very neatly built of driftwood and branches, was a small hut with a crudely thatched roof. As he gazed, a man appeared in the doorway, a very old man with white hair hanging onto his shoulders and a long white beard. At sight of Slade he gave a great cry and hobbled forward, his wrinkled face shining with eagerness and joy.

Slade stared, then abruptly his eyes blazed, and he laughed aloud. He took

a long stride forward, holding out his hand.

"How are you, Don Sebastian?" he said.

The old man halted, amazement on his wrinkled face.

"Senor," he faltered, his words coming haltingly, as from one who has used his voice but little over a long period of time. "Senor, you know me!"

"Reckon I do," Slade chuckled. "*Don* Sebastian Peralta, ain't it? Just as I figgered—not buried down in Mexico. But I shore was wonderin' what had become of yuh. Nice to find yuh squattin' here like a wing-clipped duck. How did yuh get here?"

The old man passed a shaking hand across his eyes.

"I am bewildered, utterly bewildered," he said. "But it is so wonderful, and so joyful, to hear a voice once more. I had nearly given up hope. So wonderful! But come, senor," he added with alacrity, "come to my humble abode. There is a fire and you can dry your wet clothes. I have food to offer, too, such as it is."

"Fine!" Slade applauded, "and I've got coffee and a bucket in my saddlebags. Coffee may be a mite damp, but I reckon it'll still boil up after a fashion. Reckon you could stand a cup."

"It would be as nectar fit for the gods!" Don Sebastian exclaimed. "Come, senor!"

While portions of blue grouse sizzled over the coals and coffee bubbled in the bucket, Don Sebastian told his story, which was amazing enough.

"I had become suspicious of my nephew, Manuel Peralta," he said. "For various reasons I had come to fear that he plotted to do me harm in the course of the journey to *Mejico*. I overheard two of his men talking together, and had my fears confirmed. I stole away from the camp after I thought all were asleep. I was detected and pursued. They shot my horse and he fell over the cliff with me.

"I was washed onto this island, more dead than alive. The small bone in my leg was broken, but I managed to splint and bandage it and the bone knit, after a fashion. I had my gun and a few cartridges, also matches in a tightly corked bottle that escaped breakage. I was able to make a fire. There are small animals on the island, and many birds. I shot some and trapped others with snares. There are also berries, nuts and edible roots, so I managed to keep body and soul together.

"In my crippled state, I dared not try to escape from the island. I had almost despaired and had reconciled myself to spending the remainder of my days on this spot, like a second Crusoe, without the consolation of a man Friday. Now tell me, senor, how came you here?"

IN A few terse sentences, Slade acquainted Don Sebastian with the happenings in Gomez Valley. The old man swore a string of picturesque Spanish profanity.

"And he would rob my friends, the companions of my years!" He added in bewildered tones, "But where does he get the money you say he spends so freely? There was little at the *casa*, and little to my credit in the bank."

"I figger I know the answer to that one," Slade replied grimly.

"We will confront him and denounce him for the scoundrel he is!" Don Sebastian declared wrathfully. "That is, if we can escape from our present predicament."

"I've a notion that won't be so hard to do," Slade said. "But I'm not quite ready to drop a loop on *amigo* Manuel. The real case I have in mind ain't watertight yet."

"Who, I wonder, was buried in the grave at Jacinto?" said Don Sebastian.

"Can't you guess?" Slade asked. "Your old cook was an Indian, was he not?"

"*Si*," the *hidalgo* replied. "A Yaqui, pure of blood. Senor, do you think—"

"I'm afraid so," Slade interrupted. "When I got a look at the skull in the grave, I was shore right off that it was the skull of an Indian. Of course, I couldn't say for certain, not bein' an authority on such matters. So I expressed the skull to the State University to have the contours and measurements checked. Should have a reply awaitin' me when I get back to Chino.

"Yes, I figger the skeleton in the Jacinto grave belonged to yore cook, who was about yore age. Yuh see, when

you escaped, Manuel was sort of up against it. Doubtless he realized it wouldn't do to come back to the valley with a story about yuh accidentally fallin' into the river. It would have looked funny, 'specially with what he had in mind to do.

"But a death and burial certificate from the *alcalde* and *medico* of yore old home town was something else, something that would not likely be questioned. Not having yore body to put in the grave, he did away with the poor cook and substituted him for you. He knew nobody in Jacinto would be likely te remember exactly what you looked like, even if there was somebody left alive who recalled yuh. So he took a chance."

"Poor Pedro was much the same as myself in height and build," mused Don Sebastian. "He was light in coloring for a Yaqui, and one very old man looks much like another. Also, there would be little reason to suspect the story."

"Manuel counted on that," Slade agreed. "Came mighty nigh to gettin' away with it, too. Slipped up on a little thing, like the owlhoot brand most always does."

They considered ways and means to escape from the island. After several days of hard toil, Slade managed to construct an unwieldy raft from driftwood, fallen trunks and branches, bound together with withes and creepers.

"Don't look so fancy, but I've a notion it'll hold together, if we don't go over a fall or hit a bad rapid," he told Don Sebastian. "Anyhow, it is the best we can do. Our only other choice is to stay here, which I don't particularly favor."

Before the passage down the river was negotiated, Slade was convinced more than once that his day of death by drowning was at hand. But finally the walls of the canyon fell back, the stream shallowed, and they were able to beach the raft.

THEY made their way to the mouth of the canyon and ascertained that they were many miles west of the Yucca Trail. Shadow, however, was in first class condition and offered no objections to carrying double during the long trip back to Gomez Valley.

They entered Chino cautiously, in the dead of night, and routed out the astounded sheriff.

"If this don't beat anything I ever heard of, in a story book, or out of one!" declared the old peace officer. "Shore we'll keep Sebastian under cover for a while. That's the only thing to do. By the way, Slade, here's a telegram that came for yuh yesterday. The operator asked me if I could locate yuh and I told him I'd do my best and try and get it to you."

Slade took the message and read it. He nodded with satisfaction, and passed it to the sheriff and Don Sebastian. They read:

MEASUREMENTS AND OTHER INDICES OF SPECIMEN INDICATE MONGOLOID GROUP. NOT PREHISTORIC. NEO-AMERICAN SUBDIVISION OF AMERICAN INDIAN, DOUBTLESS.

[*Turn page*]

196 PAGES OF SIX-GUN THRILLS

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IN THE GALA FEBRUARY ISSUE OF

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"You see?" Slade remarked to Don Sebastian. "Not much doubt but that the body in the grave was that of yore old cook."

"And now," said the sheriff, "what's the next move?"

"Wait," Slade counseled. "Wait, and keep a steady watch on the Snake S *casa*. I figger the hellions will get together there sooner or later. I'll keep under cover and they'll figger for shore I was drowned in the crik. That had ought to make 'em feel easy. They'll be up to somethin' before long and they'll get together to plan it out. Then we'll drop our loop!"

CHAPTER VIII

Clean-Up

DAYS of suspense followed, with picked men watching the Snake S ranchhouse day and night, and the sheriff holding his posse in constant readiness. And nothing happened. Manuel Peralta rode in and out of town, arrogant, assured. Of Curly Bill Edwards and his owlhoot bunch nothing was seen or heard.

"Chances are the hellion has slid back to New Mexico," folks began to say. "Reckon he found Texas a mite too hot for him."

And then, on a night of cloud and darkness, one of the watchers slipped in to the sheriff with information.

"Men, eight, ten of 'em, rode up to the Snake S *casa* after dark," said the informant. "Mighty quiet about it. They're in there now, with all the shutters closed."

"Let's go," Slade told the sheriff.

With the greatest caution, the posse approached the big ranchhouse, which stood dark and somber under the cloudy sky. In a thicket not far from the wide front door they paused. A faint gleam of light showed through the closed shutters.

"In the big main livin' room, the chances are," Slade breathed to the sheriff.

"Uh-huh," the peace officer whispered back, "and they got a sentry walkin' up and down in front of the porch. See him?"

"Been watchin' him," Slade returned. "Got to get him out of the way without noise. If he gives the alarm, we'll get a hot reception when we bust in. It's a salty bunch and I figger they won't give up without a fight. If we don't get the jump on 'em, we're liable to pay heavy. Keep down, now, and I'll see what I can make of that jigger."

He slid silently out of the thicket and began inching his way through the tall grass toward the watchman, who paced slowly up and down in front of the wide veranda.

The intent watchers, in the thicket, could barely follow Slade's progress by the faint radiance that seeped through the cloud blanket. They saw him reach the shelter of a small bush and pause motionless as the sentry turned and walked directly toward him. The watchman turned again before reaching the bush, however, and Slade took advantage of his back to glide forward to the shelter of a second clump.

Again he froze, a darker shadow in the shadow of the bush. The sentry turned once more and retraced his steps. Less than three yards from the bush he paused, grounded the rifle he carried and leaned his folded arms on the muzzle, staring straight at the clump of growth that sheltered the Hawk.

To the perspiring watchers in the thicket, it seemed certain that he must perceive Slade's crouching form. For perhaps three minutes the tableau held, the sentry humming a little tune, the posse scarcely daring to breathe.

Abruptly the sentry straightened up, lifted his rifle. Sheriff Blevins slid his Colt from its sheath, convinced that the crouching stalker had been detected. But the sentry turned in leisurely fashion and started to stroll back toward the porch. The quivering watchers saw Slade erect himself, take a long step forward, hands outstretched.

He gave a bound, his hands closed around the watchman's neck with a mighty wrench. There was a stifled gulp, the rifle thudded softly to the grass. A moment of convulsive twining of the two dark forms, then Slade slowly eased the flaccid body to the ground.

"Busted his neck like a dry stick!" breathed the sheriff. "That big hellion don't know his own strength!"

Slade straightened up and waved his hand. The posse crept from cover and joined him.

"Onto the porch, quiet," he whispered to them. "Then all together, hit the door with yore shoulders, and every ounce of weight behind them. Don Sebastian told me the lock ain't anything extra. It had ought to give easy, even if the bolt is shot."

Noiseless as snakes, the posse mounted the steps and gathered on the porch. Then, at a whispered word from Slade, they hit the door in a flying wedge.

The door banged open, the posse streamed into the room, which was occupied by nearly a dozen men seated around a long table.

AT THE head of the table sat Manuel Peralta. He screamed with the horror of one who sees the dead risen from the grave as his eyes rested on the lined face of Don Sebastian and the towering form of Walt Slade. Gibbering with fright, he leaped to his feet and went for his gun.

Slade shot him squarely between his glaring eyes, before he could clear leather. Curly Bill Edwards, hunched next to Peralta, surged erect, roaring curses, both guns blazing. He reeled and staggered, crashed over his chair and slumped to the floor, his breast smashed and shattered by the slugs from the Ranger's Colts. The room fairly exploded with a roar of six-shooters as the sheriff and his deputies opened fire.

Five seconds later, Slade lowered his smoking guns and peered through the powder fog at the bodies on the floor and the surviving owlhoots, hands in the air, howling for mercy. While Sheriff Blevins secured his prisoners, Slade walked over to where Manuel Peralta lay and gazed down into his dead face. He holstered his guns, shook his black head, and turned away. . . .

"Manuel tipped his hand that first night when he tried to have me killed in the saloon," Slade later told Sheriff Blevins. "He just about gave the whole business away right there. Of course, I knew the jigger who threw the knife and used the shotgun must be in cahoots with him. Peralta's Mexican hand, the one I rescued from the Slash K punchers, told Peralta I was *El Halcon,* of course, and I reckon he figgered I was here to horn in on his game.

"The notion come to me right away, why should Peralta want to do me in if he didn't have somethin' to cover up? Because I punched him in the jaw? Didn't make sense. No more than that Apache breed sneakin' back taking a desperate chance and tryin' to drygulch me just because I drilled him through the arm.

"No, I figgered there must be a stronger reason, somethin' they were willin' to go to any lengths to keep me from findin' out. Nobody could recognize the breed as bein' one of Peralta's hands, so what was the tie-up between him and Peralta? Finding that belt stuffed with new gold pieces, right after the payroll robbery, went a long way toward answerin' that one."

"Yuh figgered right off the breed was one of Curly Bill's bunch, eh?" remarked the sheriff.

Slade nodded. He paused to roll a cigarette, then resumed.

"Yes," he said. "And that got me wonderin' about Peralta and all the money he was spendin' that seemed to come from nowhere. I'd already heard how Curly Bill slipped through the sheriff's fingers when it looked like he was trapped in the valley. It was pretty plain that he had a hole-up in the valley, where he could lay low.

"The Snake S *casa* was the logical place. Nobody had any reason to suspect a tie-up between Edwards and Peralta, and Peralta had got rid of most of Don Sebastian's old workers and replaced 'em with his own men. Of course, I didn't suspect any such thing right off, but later, when I began to get a line on Peralta, the notion come to me."

"And after yuh made the trip down to Jacinto, yuh had him dead to rights," suggested the sheriff.

"Sort of," Slade admitted. "I rode down tryin' to find evidence that would show Peralta killed Don Sebastian. When I became shore that the body in the grave was not Don Sebastian's, I knew that Peralta was up to his ears in

somethin' crooked.

"I learned some things about him from the Jacinto *alcalde,* too. Seems when he used to live there, he would ride away on long trips, nobody knew where, and always come back with plenty of money. Accordin' to what the prisoners told the sheriff, he worked with Curly Bill over in New Mexico and down below the Line. He brought Edwards over into Texas, of course, and helped him pull jobs here."

"And findin' out what had been done to the old record book just about cinched the case on him," observed Blevins.

SLADE nodded thoughtfully.

"In a way," he agreed. "I took the record book to the newspaper office on a hunch. Recallin' the Reavis land fraud case in Arizona, and notin' so many similar angles, I wondered if Peralta might not have made some sort of slip like Reavis did. He was plenty smooth about the paper angle. Slid out a blank page from the back of the book, had a form printed on it and filled it out and slid it back in place.

"I've a notion a careful microscopic examination of the book would show where the page had been taken out and replaced. He would have got by if he had been more careful about the printin'. There he slipped on one of the little things, like the owlhoot brand usually do.

"Folks here were lucky, though. Reavis took thousands and thousands of dollars from his victims before he was caught up, includin' many thousands from the big Silver King Mine and fifty thousand the Southern Pacific Railroad paid him for a right-of-way across the properties.

"Somebody must have trailed me to the newspaper office and mebbe heard me and the editor talkin'. Anyhow, they laid a trap for me there on the trail and come mighty nigh to doin' me in. But my luck stood up there, and you know the rest."

"Might call it luck, but I got another name for it," grunted the sheriff.

Slade smiled. He stood up and stretched his arms.

"Well, guess I'll be ridin'," he said. "Captain Jim will have another little chore lined up for me, the chances are, by the time I get back to the post."

They watched him ride away, smiling back at them over his shoulder, gaily strumming the strings of his guitar and singing in his rich, sweet voice, a rollicking old cowboy song:

Roll along, little critters,
Yuh're aheadin' for the train!
All set for goin' places,
And yuh won't come back again!
For the roundup days are over,
And the cowboy's feelin' gay;
He's had his fill of workin'
And he hankers for some play.
Yup, he craves a snort of red-eye,
And he aims to try his luck
At a-fillin' bobtailed flushes
And a-buckin' chuck-a-luck.
Roll along through the mesquite,
Dust a-foggin' to the sun!
For we aim to raise Old Harry
When the shippin' chore is done!

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

NAVAJO NIGHT RIDERS

An Exciting Complete Novelet

By CLEE WOODS

Johnny snapped a shot in time to catch a shadow moving toward him through the trees

Again man's best friend gives proof of loyalty and courage!

EVERY DAY HAS ITS DOG

By SAM BRANT

JOHNNY DAY waited, his lean, sun-blacked face as expressionless as the west Texas sky. The thought of a regular job had worked up a growl in his famished insides.

It would have gone unnoticed, ordinarily. The big, red-faced Englishman who owned the land known by the uncomplimentary term of "Sucker's Stake," had about made up his mind, even though his foreman, Bide Selby, had stubbornly opposed the hiring of Johnny Day. And needing men as Reginald Graycie, the Englishman, did —anyone who could hold a gun, almost —Bide Selby's refusal to consider Johnny Day verged upon folly.

The big, gray-eyed, quiet-talking Englishman gave Bide's opinions a decent time to die, then nodded quietly to Johnny and grinned in a friendly way.

At that Johnny's innards had moaned audibly, with delight at his quick mental picture of endless miles of bacon and beans and flapjacks and coffee and beef and greens and gravy!

It was Graycie's dog that picked that almost-imagined sound. The half-wolf

canine had settled alertly beside her master where he stood talking to Bide and Johnny outside his rambling-built ranchhouse. "Queenie," Graycie had called the dog.

Queenie racked her furred ears forward, cocked her head, and investigated Johnny with those unblinking, gold-flecked brown eyes. Johnny's starved stomach growled again, and Queenie went into action.

With shrill barks of excitement, the dog flung itself on Johnny, took one of his skinny, browned hands in her wet mouth, then jumped high in the air and pawed at his chest.

Johnny didn't know about dogs. He thought he was being attacked, and since his young life had been such as it was, his reaction was purely instinctive.

Ever since Johnny's father had been killed in a gun-fight six years before when Johnny had been twelve, it had been a case of self-preservation. And since he was undersized and undernourished, as well as young, his fighting had been, of necessity, instant, hard, sly, and sure.

With a curse of surprise, Johnny struck the dog down and went for his gun. Out of its holster, his six-gun flashed, glinting in the sun. And just as rapidly, Graycie had jumped to save Queenie. There was the need of it, too.

The sound of the shot thundered. Johnny's hand bucked up with the recoil and his blue eyes were slitted as he peered through the acrid smoke. Graycie didn't move for a moment where he lay, his arms clutching the collie. His headlong dive, as Johnny fired, had carried him and the dog sliding flat along the ground, as his long arms wound around Queenie and shielded her from Johnny's gun.

Though the impact had stunned him momentarily, he threw himself on his left side, his gun in his hand, his voice roaring a command:

"Hold it, Bide!"

BIDE SELBY, his gun half-drawn, hesitated, his furious eyes flickering on Johnny Day. Johnny, his angry flush fading to an ashen pallor, held the smoking six-gun in his hand, his eyes, wide with fright, on Graycie.

"D-did I g-get you, Mr. Graycie?" he gasped. "L-listen, yore dog went for me, and I had to go for my gun. I was shootin' before I realized you were there!"

Graycie didn't speak for a moment. His gray eyes had gone stormy as he turned his attention to the dog. He stroked her fur gently, searching for any sign of injury, speaking soothingly to the dog, which now was growling deep in her white-vested chest and glaring balefully at Johnny.

"Quiet, girl! Quiet, Queenie! Easy there now, old thing!"

When the dog finally relaxed, the rancher pushed up to his feet and looked over at Selby.

"Sort of quick on the draw, eh, man?"

"He hauled iron first," Bide Selby snarled. "And a man like him I don't trust, no matter what his excuse may be. For all I know, he's Tuck Turner's man. Turner is out to get you, and this here ranny ain't gettin' no chance at me."

Johnny had returned his gun to its holster, after replacing the empty shell. His face was sheepish.

"I—I thought he was after me, Mister Graycie," he said, earnestly. "And so—" He finished the sentence with a shrug.

"And so you had to get 'him' first, eh, Johnny? Because that's what you have been used to, all your long, short life? Queenie is a 'she,' Johnny. But she wasn't attacking you. Queenie thought you had her puppies, and she was nuzzling around and begging you to give them back to her."

"Her pups?" Johnny blinked. "But —what would make her think that? I ain't never seen her before, let alone her pups."

Graycie smiled, and winked. "There was a sort of growling, or gurgling. Remember?" He cocked his head to look at Johnny intently. "How long since you've had a square meal, Johnny?"

The color flooded back into Johnny's face. His eyes narrowed. "None of yore business," he said, thinly. "And if I was hungry, I don't let no Englishman talk about it. I feed myself. If yuh want me to work for yuh, all you got to do is

pay me my wages."

"Watch yore manners, you lop-eared cub!" Bide said. "Mister Graycie is only bein' civil. And he's just as good an American as you are. Better, mebbe, since he's gone and—"

"Thanks, Bide," Graycie drawled, his voice lifting to cut in on his foreman and drown him out. He turned to the boy. "Johnny," he said. "You know the situation here. Tuck Turner's outfit don't want you. How about it? You taking the job?"

Johnny frowned, his eyes absently on Queenie, as he came to grips with himself again over this offer.

The job was, in some ways, a desperate one. But then Johnny Day was, in many ways, a desperate young man. Ever since Tuck Turner had passed him over, he was desperate.

Tuck Turner was bent on forcing Graycie, the last die-hard of the small independent cattlemen, to the wall. That Tuck had the rest of the small cattle ranchers all but out of business was sign enough for a wise man. But Johnny was hungry, and Tuck Turner wasn't having Johnny, for some reason Johnny couldn't yet fathom. And Graycie would. . . .

Johnny remembered the first time he had heard the name of Reginald Graycie. His father had come home to their hill-shack, the bitterness of his lonely life in his eyes and a harsh laugh on his lips, to tell of the "crazy Englishman" who had bought the so-called safety-strip that extended between Turner and Kiley.

Turner and Kiley, at that time, were fighting a bloody war for survival. Johnny had been twelve then, and the Turner and Kiley factions had clashed in a boundary dispute over an unimportant waterhole, and had shot it out.

The battle developed into a running gun-fight that spilled over into Oman, near the Rio Grande, and Johnny hid under an abandoned stage coach and had seen a half dozen tough buckaroos die.

Turner and Kiley had retired to lick their wounds, and when they emerged, it was to work a deal that had most of west Texas laughing with the shrewdness of it.

As Johnny's bitter parent had recounted:

"Law, son, the English are fools! This new Englishman who just came to Oman, has bought the strip between Turner and Kiley. Bought it! And you couldn't give it away to a Texan."

Johnny had thought about that a bit. "But, Dad, how come they are such big fools? Don't they show they're smart when they come over here?"

That was too deep for Johnny's father. He couldn't answer that one.

With the "Sucker Stake" a buffer between them, pretty soon it was noticed that the Turner and Kiley men were no longer shooting at one another. They were actually friendly, and were even working unmolested on one another's ranges. And then the thing was an open secret:

"Turner and Kiley have gone and formed themselves a combine. Instead of snipin' one another, they are both at it to squash the little cattlemen between them."

STRANGELY enough, Reginald Graycie's handkerchief-sized outfit not only remained unmolested, but started to grow. Johnny couldn't figure that.

"Remember you sayin' mebbe Englishmen got smart after they become Americans?" Johnny's father asked, when Johnny wondered about things. "Well, this one showed he was smart by stayin' English! Mebbe the marshal an' the sheriffs look the other way when King or Tuck blast a Texan, but there'd be plenty of question-askin' if an Englishman was to die under their guns! Shore, he's smart, stayin' English! I'd have a better chance if I was English myself!"

Johnny thought to ask his father about this, but his father was busy with his guns—far too important a rite to be disturbed by questions.

But he might just as well have asked, for he was never to get another chance. John Day, Sr., was found, a lifeless corpse, in the streets of Oman, two days later. And when Johnny started asking the why of it, it seemed as if nobody knew. It also seemed as if it was best for Johnny not to know. By

the time he could work up a further insistence to know, he was too busy trying to catch up on his eating to put in time asking questions.

The small outfit his father had tried to operate folded up under the load of debt. After that Johnny managed a famished sort of existence, getting an occasional job of fence-riding, or helping at a roundup, or working here and there around Oman.

But all the time he had cadged or bought with his meager earnings ammunition for the six-gun that had been pried from his dead father's lifeless hand. He practised up on target-shooting until he could draw with amazing speed for so young a lad, and shoot straight after he had drawn.

A rude shock had come when, a month ago, he had sidled up to Tuck Turner, out at Turner's Double T ranch and had asked for a job.

"Doin' what?" huge, blond Turner had asked, after a swift appraisal of the youth. "Washin' dishes?"

Johnny had flushed during the roar of laughter that had gone up from the ranch hands, listening nearby. "No, suh," he had murmured. "Ridin'. I'm right good with a gun, too."

Turner's gaze quieted on the youth. "You are, huh? You reckon yuh could let daylight through an English dude, if I was to p'int him out?" Another howl of glee paid tribute to Turner's reputation as a wit.

Turner, of course, meant Reginald Graycie. For nature, which impishly molded iron men such as Tuck Turner and King Kiley and unfairly set them down among less iron men, had played a grim trick on Tuck Turner.

A portion of the earth's crust that had slumbered quietly in that section of West Texas for uncounted centuries, had suddenly shifted, like a giant rolling in his sleep, and then gone quiet again, perhaps for more uncounted centuries to come. But it had worked its havoc on the Turner-Kiley combine. It had done, almost soundlessly, what a hundred furious men with death-dealing guns had proved themselves unable to do. It had dealt a death blow at the Turner-Kiley ranges.

For the water that had flowed in from the Rio Grande in such copious streams was now dammed up by a series of small landslides. And until modern methods of irrigation could be employed to effect even some small relief, the only water that flowed through that tableland was the water of Sucker's Stake.

Johnny had shrugged his thin shoulders. "Reckon I can shoot anything gets in my way," he answered. "I don't often miss."

Tuck Turner liked that answer. He grinned and nodded.

"Yuh don't, eh? What's yore name, boy?"

"Johnny Day," the youth answered simply.

"Oh!" Turner said, then. His eyes ranged the group nearby, challengingly, but nobody said anything. "Shore. Yep." Then his teeth showed, and he chuckled. "I'm afraid I can't use yuh, boy. Might turn out you couldn't shoot no better than yore dad!"

The roars of the ranch hands echoed once more, and Johnny Day stood with watery eyes and flaming face, glaring his hatred. He turned to his pony, mounted and left, riding to the prod of the continued laughter. He cursed Turner for that gratuitous insult to his father, vowing to get even some day.

"I ought to have shot Tuck Turner!" he muttered as he rode off across the Double T range. "He'll pay for slurrin' my dad. I'll fix him, some day—somehow."

FOLLOWING the interview, Johnny Day had retired to his bare shack in the hills to think it over. The more he thought about Turner, the angrier he got. Three days later, he had ridden over to the Sucker's Stake outfit to offer his gun.

"Some time," he had reasoned it out, "Turner will get tired of tryin' to buy that crazy Englishman out, and will jump Graycie's grass. And there'll be a new range war. And when that happens I want to be on the other side, workin' for Graycie as a gun hand. Then I'll show Turner what a mistake he made in passin' me up!"

He'd been glad, when he'd ridden over to Sucker's Stake, that Graycie had

not given up his status as an Englishman. Had he, then Turner and Kiley would have moved in on Graycie with blazing guns long before this and Johnny wouldn't have had this chance to show Turner how wrong he had been. For, of course, Tuck Turner would move in eventually.

Johnny didn't for one moment question his ability to come out of the ensuing struggle with a whole skin. If you've squirmed and fought and twisted your life as long as Johnny had his, you get to have a sort of inner certainty that you can handle things.

Afterward he might have to hide out for a while, when he'd shot Turner. Johnny Day didn't intend to kill Turner —just wound him severely enough to wipe out that insult.

And now, when he'd ridden over to the Sucker's Stake to get that coveted job with Graycie, Queenie, the Englishman's collie-wolf dog, had tried to bite him and he'd nearly shot Graycie while trying to defend himself. It looked bad. He'd played in hard luck, and it looked as if Bide Selby, Graycie's foreman, had taken a dislike to him. Certainly the foreman was continuing to glare at Johnny in a belligerent fashion.

He'd got to Graycie and offered himself. He'd seen the big, red-faced, graying man around Oman now and again, often enough to know him to nod to. And he knew Graycie would know him. More than once, Johnny had puzzled about Graycie, about the quizzical, almost friendly way the man would look at him. And then he'd wink! As if they shared some secret, they two.

Now he winked at Johnny again, his slow smile starting and holding, steady and quiet as his gray eyes. But Selby continued to scowl.

"Boss, I shore don't want this ranny workin' for me," Selby said. "I don't trust him. Mebbe Turner sent him here."

Johnny heard this conjecture with flickering eyes, but he said nothing. Graycie laughed.

"Turner never sent him, Bide."

"Well, mebbe not," Bide Selby conceded evenly. "But I have the same reason I would fer not wantin' a wolf to bed down with some sheep. The same reason. Only more so, boss. 'Cause I knows just how a wolf will act under certain conditions. I could be shore of the wolf, see? But this feller, I don't know, and I can't tell which way he'll jump. He's too fast and free with his gun, and I don't want him workin' fer me."

As Bide launched his slurring talk, Johnny Day's hand had crept to the walnut grip of his gun and he held it there, his eyes glaring and his lips twisted back from his teeth. The Englishman snapped his fingers at Queenie, the dog, and Queenie trotted obediently out of line of the two opposed men.

Graycie faced Bide and Johnny then, opened his lips as if to speak but, instead, stared curiously at the youth. For Johnny Day's muscles had relaxed and his hand had dropped away from the butt of his gun. His eyes blinked before they shifted to Graycie, then returned to Selby.

"See that?" the ranch foreman asked the Englishman, contempt heavy in his voice. "See what I mean, boss? You can almost hear him figurin' which way it's best for him to hop. He'd have tried for a shoot-out if you hadn't been here and he hadn't wanted the job."

"Now, Bide!" Graycie said. "Let up, Bide."

Johnny shifted his feet nervously. "What you got against me, Selby? Speak yore piece! I ain't never crossed horns with you."

"What have I got against you?" Bide spat tobacco juice in the dust. "You was seen over at Turner's place and yuh braced him for a job before comin' here. Ain't that enough. It strikes me as a-plenty!"

"Shut up, Bide!" Graycie moved in between them. "Well, Johnny? You know the set-up? The latest word is that Tuck Turner, who has always run matters around here with a high hand, has gotten tired of waiting and is ready to take drastic measures. He's massed his band of tough gun hands and plans to grab my range any time now. Kiley, so I hear, has lost his nerve and has pulled out of the combine because he thinks I'm an Englishman, know I own the land outright and is afraid of trouble with the Federal Government."

"I've heard things," Johnny Day admitted. "But I didn't s'pose trouble was goin' to pop so quick."

"Well, it is!" Graycie said emphatically. "The only way Turner can hit this outfit now is through Coyote Canyon. All other places are guarded and I need one more man, a trusted hand, to guard that because some of Turner's men might try to run off my cattle and sell them to the Mexicans, across the Border. That would break me, and Turner knows it."

Graycie paused, looked at Johnny and smiled again in his friendly way.

"I need a good man to guard the mouth of Coyote Canyon and I think you're just the kind of a guard we should have. If you want the job, you can have it."

"I'm ready," Johnny said.

Bide laughed, but without humor. "See, boss? He's up to some trick. Gunhands rate top pay, but this feller doesn't even ask yore terms, he's so anxious to work here. Well, go ahead and hire him, if yuh're set on it, but don't say I didn't warn yuh!"

Grumbling, the burly foreman had swung himself into saddle and ridden away. Graycie didn't say anything until Selby was out of earshot, then he turned to Johnny.

"You're hired," he said. "I'll pay you top gunhand salary and I'm sending you into that canyon, to guard it and keep Tuck Turner out." His smile faded and his voice grew grave. "Probably Turner will choose some other route and you won't be bothered. I'm trusting you, Johnny!"

JOHNNY'S eyes glowed. "Yes, suh. You won't be sorry."

"I'm sure I won't," Graycie said. "We have a line house up in Coyote Canyon. You know where it is, how to get there?"

"Yes, suh," answered Johnny. "I know."

"I'm letting you take this dog, Queenie, along with you," Graycie went on. "The hearing and sense of smell of dogs are much keener than those of men. Queenie will prevent anyone from sneaking up on you in the line cabin and taking you by surprise. Understand?"

"Don't want no dawg," Johnny answered. "I'll do better alone, by myself.

But the Englishman shook his head. "You're on my payroll and I'll dictate how you will work. Those are orders. You take along the dog. She'll watch while you are sleeping."

"Ain't necessary," objected Johnny. "I sleep plumb light."

"Nevertheless what I say goes," Graycie answered gently. "You've heard the old saying, 'Every Day has its dog.' You don't know much about dogs, I can see that, and Queenie will be bally fine company for you. Johnny, think how tough it must be with a dog! A dog can't save anything up against hard times, can't ask for medicine if it is sick, or help itself if it's treated unfairly. Yes, Johnny, every Day should have its dog."

"Don't want no dog," Johnny answered stubbornly.

"Nevertheless you'll take one, this one, Queenie, with you." The Englishman waited a moment. "Before I went to El Paso last month, I got rid of Queenie's pups, and she keeps looking for them. That's why she went for you today when your stomach growled. She was looking for her pups. I think she'll forget them if you take her up to the line cabin."

Johnny shrugged. "Might be she'll die," he suggested.

Graycie's eyes narrowed. "In that case, I warn you to preserve her carcass, just to prove she died a natural death. You'll start right away. But first, we'll let the cookie feed you up while the boys are loading a pack-horse with provisions. Come along, Johnny."

It was only after Johnny was wolfing down his fifth stack of hot cakes and bacon that he looked up and met Graycie's amused eyes. Johnny paused, challengingly.

Graycie smiled, and closed an eye in a wink. A little later, he said to Johnny, "Here, have some more coffee. And —uh, Johnny? If—uh—anything should happen to me, I want you to keep the dog. Keep Queenie. Treat her right, old boy, eh?"

"Don't want no dawg," Johnny said through the cakes.

But, when he left, the dog trotted along as far as the barns, and then turned back. But not for long. Graycie spoke to the dog sternly, some words that Johnny couldn't hear, and pointed to Johnny. Queenie whined but trotted obediently along when Johnny took up the trail again, leading the pack-horse behind Blaze, his own mount. His equipment included a rifle.

Queenie's tail was between her legs, and her dumbly accusing eyes were on Johnny.

"Well, I didn't want you to come along neither!" Johnny snarled. "Don't worry, girl, you won't be with me long!"

A week later, when the norther had pulled the string on a leaden sky and was coating the lonely pass with cold and silent death, Johnny looked up from the fire he was making when Queenie whimpered.

"Don't worry! I don't like it no better'n you do. You ain't goin' to have long to wait. Not with this weather."

He got the fire going in the stove, listened to Blaze and the pack-horse chuffing and stamping around in the lean-to, and came back to drop down on his bunk in the gloom. Queenie got up from the floor, leaped up on the bunk, and nuzzled up to him.

"Get down!" Johnny snapped. "I fed yuh! Besides, I told yuh not to get up on my bunk. I don't want no mangy dog sleepin' atop me!" He grunted unintelligibly when Queenie just wagged her tail the harder. After a while, Johnny absently started to scratch the dog's ears.

Suddenly Queenie perked her head up. Close by in the gloom, a horse nickered. Johnny cursed himself for weakening to the cold enough to start a night fire.

He went on mouse-quiet feet to the single window of the shack, a rear window that let out on the canyon passage behind, even though he knew he would see nothing there. The horse nickered again. Out in the gloom the sound was chopped off with an abruptness that

[*Turn page*]

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Johnny knew was man-inspired.

"They're here!" he muttered, his hands trembling in his excitement. "If it was Graycie, or Selby, or one of the boys, Queenie would be yelpin' for joy."

Graycie and Selby had both dropped in at the cabin, a few times, to check on things. The first time, Queenie had wanted to go back with them, and the second time, Johnny felt like a fool when he was glad Queenie clung close to him and made no effort to go.

He was glad again, now, that she had stayed, for a plan was already in Johnny's mind, a plan which he had worked with cunning in his spare time, at the canyon shack. He set it into operation just as he had worked it out with Queenie a dozen times before.

"Quiet, Queenie!" he whispered. "Quiet, girl! Stay there!" Queenie thumped her tail in the dark, and her warm tongue went to Johnny's hand. The youth jerked his hand away. "I told yuh to quit lickin', I don't like it. Quit it!"

Queenie thumped her tail and licked his hand some more.

He went to the window and slid it back in the well-tallowed groove. As silently he picked up the rifle, reached through the window to lean it against the wall outside. In another moment he had slithered after it.

He paused, looking back into the gloom of the room, saying, "Remember, Queenie, the way we done it. When I whistle you bark. Bark like all get-out!"

Johnny knew he might be cherishing false hopes. Perhaps Queenie would do as he had secretly trained her or she wouldn't. But Queenie's tail-thump that came to him in the stillness of the night sounded reassuring.

He slid soundlessly down the snowy canyon, passed the furtive raiders and paused, further on, facing the cabin. He didn't see the men but he heard the stamp of a horse.

When he whistled, making it sound like a night-flying bird, Queenie started barking loudly and furiously. This was to lead them to think he and the dog were still in the cabin so they would expose their exact position to him, and he could get the drop on them.

"Good girl," he whispered. A rough voice spoke sharply, so close to him that Johnny almost jumped.

"Like we was told, it's only that kid and the dog."

Another answered from behind the shadow of a fallen trunk. "Yeah! We'll have to go in for him, afore we can drop down on the big herd. Listen, Tuck, I told yuh you was a fool not to have hired that runt of a gunhand. What if yuh did drygulch his old man? Now you got to drygulch him! Or worse yet—rush the cabin. Dang this snow, anyhow. Well—let's just lay him away and keep a-goin'."

So that was it! At last Johnny understood about the way Bide Selby and a lot of the others had acted toward him. And he was admitting to himself that maybe it was something he had known all the time, but just didn't want to admit.

Tuck Turner had drygulched his father, Johnny's father! He had killed him unfairly, without a chance. He knew he was a fool even as he did it.

"Just lie real still, all of you!" he called out tensely. "I got yuh covered and with a rifle. We'll just stay thisaway until day comes, all of us. An' then I got somethin' that me and Tuck Turner are goin' to settle. But it won't be no drygulchin'. Just lie still. I'll see you if yuh move, no matter if there are ten of yuh, I'll get yuh! So stay where yuh are."

"Let's talk this over," Tuck Turner's voice came, after a moment. "I can use a smart boy. I didn't really drygulch yore pappy, boy. I—I made a mistake. I thought he was agoin' for his Colt, and seems he was just fetchin' some 'baccy up. But he went for his gun after I drew. So—"

"Lie quiet," Johnny said tightly. "Lie quiet!"

And then he became aware of something else. Something he hadn't allowed for. Queenie was used to his coming back to the cabin soon after the whistle. Now that he wasn't going to use that second whistle, she was puzzled, anxious, wondering what was wrong.

He could hear her shrill yelps—could hear her clawing at the barred door of the shack, and groaned when his mind

raced ahead to what would probably happen. She'd eventually come out the window. She'd come out, make for the attackers, and be killed.

"No! No, Queenie!" he shouted, in the deadly quiet. "No, girl! Stay where yuh are, Queenie!"

A hard laugh sounded from the ambushed group. A shot smacked a tree close by Johnny's head.

"Give up, kid, or I'll whistle yore dawg out for yuh," Tuck Turner said. "We'll kill her and get you next. Anyway, we won't have no dawg to bother us."

"Let the dawg alone," Johnny said steadily. "This ain't her fight. She ain't bothered you none."

"Get her when she shows her nose, boys!" Turner rasped from his cover. "I'm a-callin' her!"

His whistle sounded sharp and loud, and Queenie yelped loud and happily, and the plop of her body into the snow outside the cabin was audible to them all.

She marked her way toward them in a shrilling riot of sound. As if to say, "This is fun! Isn't this fun, boss? Where are you, boss?"

Johnny sighed, "Ain't I the loco fool!" he said as he raised the rifle and loosed his first searching shots toward the tethered mass of horses. "Ain't I just spooked, now! Tough Johnny Day! Haw!"

A man screamed in the roaring gunfire. Something slammed Johnny in the head, and he went down. There was wet on his face. He raised his hand, and that was wet, too. Wet with a moist tongue of Queenie who had come padding to his side.

"Down, girl!" he commanded. "And stay there, yuh fool. Oh, yuh big fool! Yuh're too dumb to know a trap from a game. Or mebbe yuh don't care, huh?"

He snapped a shot in time to catch a shadow moving in on him through the trees.

"Next?" he called. "Come and get it!"

A half-hour and countless shots later, Johnny thought he heard Tuck Turner's dying cry. He fought the weakness that was on him, steadied his rifle on the fallen trunk, and waited.

He waited so long, he didn't know how long he had waited. It was this sort of waiting you did when Eternity moved in on ghostly feet. . . .

He opened his eyes and saw the white of the sheet on his chest. He thought it was snow, and he moved to brush it off. He found he couldn't move his hands, and anyway he was too warm for it to be snow. He looked up and saw Bide Selby. Then Reginald Graycie.

"The crazy Englishman," he whispered.

Graycie smiled slowly. "Maybe a crazy Texan," he murmured. "Take it easy, boy. You're hurt, but you'll mend."

"Meet another crazy Texan," Johnny said, weakly. "How about the Turner bunch?"

"Seven dead, two will live to go to jail," Graycie said.

Johnny blinked. "And Queenie?"

A joyous yelp sounded from beside him on the bed. Johnny smiled. "Danged pest, that's what she is. Nearly got me killed. Yuh better take her away with yuh, huh?"

"Eh? And get bitten again?" Graycie asked. "Oh, no, old boy. Every Day has its dog, and Queenie is yours, I think."

He smiled at Johnny's gulp—and winked.

"I Reckon Yuh Got Onto the Wrong Spread, Youngster!"

THAT was the only greeting Tack Gentry heard when he returned to his home range—to find that evil days had overtaken it, and that there were many changes. Changes which were backed with the defiant snarl of six-gun death—in KEEP TRAVELIN', RIDER, a smash-packed action novelet by Jim Mayo! Look forward to this bang-up yarn—one of the many exciting fiction treats coming in next month's issue!

My rock misses Tex, and hits SOS in the stomach

FROG LEGS, AND THEN SOME

By BEN FRANK

Gus Givens' craving for frog legs sure got him mixed up with critters that could jump faster 'n' harder than he expected!

IT IS spring, and I am no little restless, for in the spring I remember back to the days when I am not married to Minnie and do not have a home and a ranch with a mortgage on it to worry me. In those days, life is very lovely with me rolling up a blanket or two around some grub and riding over to Skunk Creek to catch myself some frogs, for there is nothing I like better than fried frog legs in the spring and the blue sky over my head and a feeling that I have not got no cares in the wide world.

So I am restless and then some, and I stand on the front porch, which is about ready to fall down, and jingle two quar-

ters and a half-buck in my pocket and look longingly toward the mountains, while in the kitchen I hear Minnie rattle pans, which reminds me that it is very unlikely that I can go to Skunk Creek this spring to hunt frogs on account of what happened last spring.

The pans suddenly become quiet, and Minnie's gentle voice reaches me through the open door.

"Gus Givens," she says, "if we don't fix this house up soon, it is going to fall about our ears. Two hundred and fifty dollars would—"

"Why, dear," says I, a sudden inspiration of how I might get away from home striking me like a bolt of lightning, "that is exactly what I am thinking. I also am thinking that I should ought to ride over to Jackpot and talk to Banker Holt about loaning us two-fifty to put the house up in shape."

"You," says Minnie flatly, "are thinking of no such thing. You are thinking how you would like to go frog hunting and meet up with Samuel Overbrook Slocum."

That is a wife for you. You cannot slip nothing over them, especially a wife like Minnie, who taught school up until I married her two years ago.

"Dear," I says, knowing there is no use to deny nothing, "a good frog hunt would likely do more to make me want to go to work this spring than anything you could think of. If I should feel like working, I could earn two-fifty without—"

"Gus," she says, "I have got no objection to you hunting frogs. It is who you always meet when you go that I do not like. Like last year when you met Samuel Overbrook Slocum, and you went to Jackpot and got tossed into jail and—"

SOLEMNLY I says, "Dear, never again will I have nothing to do with Samuel Overbrook Slocum. Too many times has he already got me into trouble. If he should happen to ride by where I am hunting frogs, I will ignore him completely and more so. SOS and me are no longer buddies. A married man like me, who has such a sweet little wife, has got no business of even speaking to such as him."

"I don't believe a word you say," she says, "but I know you will never settle down to the spring work until you have had your fill of frog legs. If you promise that you will have nothing to do with that Samuel—"

I lift my right hand and look her in the eyes very direct.

"I promise, dear!" I says, meaning it exactly. "I will stick to frog hunting strictly and do nothing else no matter what."

"You go hunt your frogs," she says, giving me that smile I like very much, "but remember I will expect you to get together two-hundred-fifty dollars someway to keep the house from falling apart. Another thing, if you and Samuel get into trouble, I will raise a rumpus. And I don't mean perhaps!"

"Samuel and me are completely enemies and then some," I declare. "And I also will bring home a sack of frog legs."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars would interest me more than a wagon load of frog legs," she says, and goes back to the kitchen.

I feel very happy and know that I have a very fine wife in Minnie, who understands how it is with me about frog legs in the springtime. I even feel a little guilty about the ten dollars I have in my pocket and am holding out on her, for I do not think she needs a new hat and a pair of silk stockings.

However, I think twice and decide to keep the sawbuck in my pocket, for after all, that with $240 more will fix up the house so it will not fall down. Jingling the two quarters and the half-buck, I wander out to the barn to get my things together for the frog hunt, for I will want to get a very early start for Skunk Creek the next day.

So even before the sun is up over the east range, I am on my way, whistling and feeling very good. Along toward noon, I come to the foot of the mountains and to Skunk Creek, which flows out of the mountains and flattens out in the grass and weeds, making a very nice place indeed for frogs to raise their families.

I unpack my saddle roll, build a fire and fry some bacon and one thing and another, thinking how for the next meal, I will be eating frog legs, and my mouth waters and I feel happy and almost as young as before I married Minnie, and Samuel Overbrook Slocum and me were pals.

I wrap a piece of bacon in a slice of bread and start it toward my mouth. The

clatter of a horse on rocks makes me look up, and I see a long, skinny redhead with a bent nose and a pair of faded blue eyes grinning at me from where he sets in a very skuffed saddle on a yellow hammerhead. He is none other than Samuel Overbrook Slocum.

"I knowed I'd find yuh here, Gus," he yells, sliding to the ground. "Gus," he says, "yuh're a sight for sore eyes!"

"SOS," I says politely but coldly, "I promised Minnie I would not so much as say 'hello' to you. Kindly remount your horse and go on your way."

HE SIGHS and sets down with his skinny back against a runty pine and helps himself to a hunk of bacon.

"I was afraid of that," he says sadly. "Minnie don't have no use for me, thinkin' I am a bad influence. But could I help it that we busted the window out of the hardware store with them rocks we was thrownin' at them pigeons?"

"There was only one pigeon," I remind him with dignity.

"I know," he sighs, "but it looked like two."

He reaches for more bacon and helps himself to the coffee.

"We could kind of slip into Jackpot tonight an' have us a small drink for ole times' sake," he goes on hopefully. "Minnie would likely never hear about it."

"SOS," I says coldly, "them old days is water under the bridge. Besides, I cannot afford to spend my money on foolishness. My house needs two hundred fifty dollars' worth of fixing up."

"Being single," he interrupts, "I have money enough for both of us. We will be very careful this time not to throw rocks at pigeons."

"I have not been to Jackpot all winter," I murmur, weakening somewhat, "and I have drunk nothing stronger than coffee. A man deserves more out of life than coffee. Even with sugar."

"You are right, Gus," SOS nods. "Of course, coffee has its place, but—"

"I am not so broke, either," I go on. I jingle the coins in my pocket and show him the ten-spot I have stashed away. "However, on account of the house I cannot afford to spend the sawbuck."

"Pal," he says, his pale eyes lighting up at the sight of the sawbuck, "let us not quibble over expenses, especially when I am paying them. Let us be on our way to Jackpot for ole times' sake and, maybe, two shots of forty-rod instead of one. We will get back here before morning and catch enough frogs for breakfast, but in the meantime—"

"I hadn't ought to do this," I says unhappily, "but since it will not make no difference to the repair of my home, and Minnie will not know about it, I will go."

"Gus," he says, slapping me on the back, "I love yuh like a brother and would cut off my right arm and then some for yuh. Life would not be worth shucks if us two couldn't get together in the springtime like we used to before Minnie got her hooks on yuh."

"Minnie," I remind him, "is a mighty fine wife. I am extremely happy with her and would not want her to have to come to Jackpot to get us out of jail again like last spring."

"We will not pay no attention to pigeons," he promises, and throws a long, bowed leg over the saddle.

I kick out the fire, hang my blankets and grub in the pine tree and also climb into the leather. In no time at all, we are on our way to Jackpot, singing us a duet, him being a very neat tenor, and me letting out with a baritone of which I am right proud.

IT IS a long ride from Skunk Creek to Jackpot, so it is dark and then some with the stars bright by the time we leave our horses at the livery barn to be fed. We go on along the board walk to the Night Owl, and SOS leads the way through the batwings and up to the bar.

Nobody but Louie, the barkeep, pays us any heed, for everyone is gathered in a huddle and talking excited like. I gather from words dropped here and yon that a certain unsavory character by the name of Black Tex is now a resident of the Jackpot jail, and that the upright citizens of the town are looking upon Sheriff Shorty Shane as quite a hero for having put the clinch on Black Tex, him being a hand for robbing banks and shooting various people who do not move out of his way soon enough. But in all this I am not interested in the least, for I cannot help but worry some about breaking my promise to Minnie.

Louie, the barkeep, gives us a somewhat sour look, and says, in a nasty way!

"Why is it you two have to turn up together each spring? I thought Gus a-gettin' married would put a stop to it."

"Louie," SOS says coldly, "let us not go into that. Let us have a neat three fingers of you know what. Gus and me just happened to run into each other, an' for ole times' sake—"

"I am strictly here on the q-t," I hasten to explain. "SOS and me are not buddies no longer, and I would not care for my wife to know that I am having a small nip with him for old times' sake what-so-ever."

"That is absolutely the gospel truth," SOS says, "so, Louie, be so kind as to set the bottle and two glasses within easy reach. An' if yuh are worrying a-tall about getting paid, may I inform yuh that me and my ex-buddy have between us some twenty-odd smackeroos."

"Only," I hastened to add, "I am saving up to repair the house."

"It ain't the money that worries me," Louie says, putting down a bottle and two glasses in front of us. "It is what is likely to happen when you boys get fired up—if history repeats itself as it usually does."

"Nothing is going to happen," I assure him. "We are strictly having but one drink each tonight."

"Absolutely!" SOS says, filling his glass to the brim. "Just one. Or, maybe, two at the utmost."

I fill my glass less than half, for I am remembering last year and the pigeons, which I do not want to have happen again. However, I find half a glass on an empty stomach is not to be taken lightly, especially after a winter on coffee and water.

SOS downs his glass and staggers slightly while his pale eyes roll upward and his long nose twitches. Suddenly he yells, "Yippee!" and pulls out his .45 and sends two shots up through the ceiling. Then he holsters the gun and reaches for the bottle.

I see Louie, the barkeep, put the evil eye on SOS as he takes a bung starter and slips it under his splotched apron. I am pondering whether or not I should warn SOS about Louie and the bung starter when I see a little sawed-off gent with a graying mustache sidle up from the huddle of men.

This hombre wears a tin star and is none other than Shorty Shane, the sheriff, and I get a weak feeling in my knees which reminds me that I have no business being here instead of catching frogs.

Now, SOS does not notice Shorty Shane, or nothing. He tosses off his second glass and makes to shoot two more holes into the ceiling of the Night Owl, only he does not, for Shorty pulls his own gun and taps SOS with it neatly behind his right ear. SOS sighs softly and folds up on the sawdust floor, a innocent look on his bony face.

THE sheriff returns his gun to the holster and puts the evil eye on me.

"Why," he asks, "is it that you an' this bag of bones has to get into trouble once each spring? I have a good mind to lock yuh both up before anything more happens."

"Sheriff," I says quickly, not liking the smell of things no little, "you are mistaken about me and SOS showing up together to start trouble. In fact, we are not together. We just happen to meet at the door and walk in together. I am strictly full of dislike for him and no longer associate around with him now that I am a married man very settled down with a house that needs fixing and all."

"That's right, Sheriff," Louie says. "Gus said when they first come in that him and SOS was no longer buddies."

"Exactly!" I says. "It would do me good to see you lock the scoundrel up and then some. But as for me, it would be a no little injustice should yuh throw me in the clink also. If there is anyone I dislike, it is a no-good trouble maker like Samuel Over—"

"Gus," SOS says weakly from where he is folded up on the floor, "you are the biggest liar I have ever laid eyes onto!"

"Don't listen to him, Sheriff," I says. "He is so drunk he don't know straight up from sideways."

"Why, yuh lousy, lop-eared cuss—" SOS begins, and starts to gather up his .45.

The sheriff's arm moves, and there follows a hollow thump, and SOS closes his pale eyes again and lays back down on the floor.

"Gus," the sheriff says to me, "for once I will take yore word and give yuh the benefit of any doubt, mainly because

yuh have a fine girl for a wife, and I would not want her to have to bail yuh out of jail this spring like she has previous. However, watch yore step!"

With that he reaches over, hooks fingers in SOS' shirt collar and drags him through the batwings into the night.

Watching the empty swinging door, I have a feeling of great remorse. I feel that I have maybe been a traitor to SOS, and I remember the many good times we have had together, and I become sadder. I take a real small drink for old times' sake, which only makes me feel worse, so I try a much larger one. After this, I feel like I am going to break down and cry, which I do not want to do before so many citizens of Jackpot, so I head for the door.

The door does not stay in one place like it should, but circles about the room, so I have some difficulty in getting outside. I wander along the street, blinking back the tears and wondering if SOS will ever forgive me for not standing by him.

I set down on a well platform in front of Ike Tool's feed store and wish I was dead and then some. At last, I zigzag across the street and around the corner to the jail. It is very dark. From the Night Owl, which is close by, comes laughter and various happy noises, making me feel worse by a great deal.

I slip around to a barred window in the back, and say:

"SOS, are yuh in there?"

I hear a slight noise of somebody getting up off a cot, and I know I have come to the right window, for SOS is one never to miss a chance to lay down any time there is a bed handy.

"Pal," I says, "I am downright sorry about not standing by you, but you understand how it is. Me being married makes a difference now from what it was before. If I was single, I'd told that sheriff a thing or two. You understand, don't you, Samuel?"

The prisoner moves to the window, for I can see his shadowy form behind the bars, but he don't say a single word, he is that put out with me.

"Speak to me, pal," I says. "Why, I'd cut off my right arm and then some for you. Only I don't want Minnie to know."

"If yuh're so fond of me," he whispers hoarsely, "get me outa this dump."

"Hold on a minute," I says. "I can't get yuh out with only ten dollars. Besides I got to save that money to fix up my house."

HE SIGHS and turns away from the window, and I hear him shuffling back toward the cot.

"They'll let you out in the morning," I comfort him. "I'll stick around, and we'll go back to Skunk Creek together."

"I want out now!" comes the fierce answer. "If yuh was really my pal, yuh'd get somethin' and pry the bars off that window. But no—yuh just stand there and shoot off yore mouth."

"If you bust out," I says, "they'll really put you in to stay some time and longer when they catch you."

"You're no pal of mine," he says in a funny voice like he might be crying.

"I'll show you!" I says, feeling terrible at them words coming from him.

I hurry over to Coot Henderson's blacksmith shop and feel around in the junk pile until I get hold of an old buggy axle. This I carry back to the jail pronto.

"Only one thing I ask," I says as I get the end of the axle between the bars, "don't never tell Minnie about this."

"Don't worry," he whispers. "Just twist them bars out of them old bricks in a hurry."

I do this, while all the time the noises from the Night Owl cover the sounds I make. It is scarcely no trick at all to get those bars loose.

"Bend over," he says, "so's I can climb out and put a foot on yore back. I would not want to bust a leg jumping out of this place."

At the moment, I do not think this is a unusual request, so I bend over. I hear him crawling through the window and I am expecting him to put his foot in the middle of my back, when something explodes inside my head, and I see a million stars or more.

The next thing I know, I am looking up into the dark sky and my head is aching like a bad tooth and I realize that SOS has gone and left me, which I feel is a dirty trick after I have gone to all the trouble to let him out.

I set up and rub my head and feel a very tender knot on it the size of a teacup. I pull myself to my feet with the help of the jail wall and consider some of

getting my horse and riding back to Skunk Creek.

Then I realize that my six-gun and belt are gone, and I call SOS a few names which I will not mention, for it is a double dirty trick for him to take my gun and leave me laying in a alley, besides rapping me over the head. Also, I wonder how I will explain the loss of the gun to Minnie.

Then I remember the sawbuck and rush a hand into my pocket. The sawbuck is still there, also the two quarters and the half-buck, and I breathe a deep sigh of relief. After this, I stagger to the livery barn, which has a handy back door.

By the time I get inside the barn, I realize I am in no condition to ride back to Skunk Creek, let alone catch any frogs for breakfast. I find a cozy pile of hay and sprawl on it for a sleep, which I figure will set me up in good trim for tomorrow.

Before you know it, the morning sun is coming through a window and slapping me in the face. I set up and realize that I am feeling not so bad and find myself anxious for a taste of frog legs and to be well out of Jackpot. In a way, I regret no little that I let SOS talk me into coming to Jackpot in the first place, for I remember somewhat hazy how I ripped the bars out of the jail window, and I do not care for anyone knowing I am guilty of this.

Especially Sheriff Shorty Shane, for I would not want a fine wife like Minnie to have to come and get me out of jail again this spring.

I think it will be best if I saddle up and slip out the back way. While I am saddling up, I notice that SOS has took his horse and gone, and for this I am grateful. After all, I am a married man and have no business letting a bad influence like SOS being around me, even if for old times' sake.

JUST as I jerk the cinch strap tight, old man Porter, the liveryman, comes hobbling out from his office, so there is nothing for me to do but pay him the half-buck I owe him for feed and go out the front way like as if everything is okay with me.

"Lots of excitement in town this mornin'," he says as I put a foot in a stirrup to climb up. That is when I first notice I have lost my left spur. I am about to climb down and go look for it in the pile of hay, when he goes on with, "Somebody busted a window outa the jail last night an' let Black Tex out. The sheriff is raisin' all holy heck!"

I forget all about the spur, while inside my stomach I feel ice begin to freeze and then some.

"No!" I says hoarsely.

"Yep," he nods. "Some feller took a buggy ax an' pried the bars loose. Sheriff's offerin' five hundred for the capture of Black Tex. Says he'd shoot on sight the hombre what let him out if he finds him."

This last statement I do not like and then some.

"If I am going to catch myself a mess of frog legs," I says weakly, "I had ought to be on my way. G'by."

I ride out into the street. I take my time, for there is no point in drawing attention by a too hurried departure. Besides, let it never be said that Gus Givens is the kind who runs away from trouble that has not come as yet. All the time, I am wondering how it is that I did not stay at Skunk Creek and catch frogs instead of come to town with SOS. Also, I wonder what has become of SOS.

I am just beginning to think that I will be able to leave Jackpot in a somewhat dignified way, when a cowpoke stares at me and sets up a holler.

"That feller ain't go no spur on his left boot!" he bawls.

"So what?" I says. "Can't a man lose a spur without—"

A gun goes off, and a bullet whistles past my left ear. Another gun blasts. Right then I discover they are shooting at me. I duck and kick my horse into a very fast run. When I glance back, it looks as if the whole town is getting ready to follow me.

I am not sure what it is all about, but I feel worried, for I do not want to see Minnie become a widow so young. I head for the hills, figuring that if I am lucky, I can shake the posse and save Minnie much sorrow. Besides, I have not had any fried frog legs yet this spring and do not want to miss out on this delicacy.

The way that posse wastes ammunition is something and then some, and I do not like it no little. All the time, when I think of it, I keep asking myself why is it that because I have lost a spur, they are shoot-

ing at me and howling like a pack of hungry wolves?

Before I can get this figured out, I come to the timber that borders the hills, which is no little relief, for when they cannot see me, they stop wasting their ammunition.

I circle the base of a hill and cut into a gully. From there I come to a creek, ride down the middle of it for a half-mile, then turn into another gully with a rocky floor. I can no longer hear the posse following, so I begin to worry less and less about them and more and more about what Minnie will say when the posse decides to go to my ranch to wait for me to come home.

The more I think about this, the more I wish I had not busted the window out of the jail for old times' sake. Also, if SOS had been handy, I would have likely punched him on his crooked nose for the bad influence he is on me.

Feeling lower than a ant in a gopher hole, I ride up over a ridge and see below me a hombre setting all hunched over a small camp fire. On second look, I realize he is none other than Samuel Overbrook Slocum himself, and that he is cooking himself up a mess of grub. I examine myself for feelings of hunger and find I have them very much, but I am somewhat doubtful of my welcome, for SOS has been known to hold a grudge against a man for several days at a time.

I leave my horse behind a nice growth of scrub pine and ease around to the south so that I can get a look at his face and, maybe, gather from this what kind of a mood he is in since I do not have my .45, in case a argument should arise between us two.

I COME to some tumbled boulders and skirt these cautiously and ease around on the other side to find myself able to get a good look at his face. He does not look anything except somewhat pleasant, so I make ready to say "hello" but do not, for at the moment my mouth opens, a man steps out from some bushes with a gun in his hand, which he points at SOS.

"Easy, my friend!" this gent says in a voice that makes goose pimples pop out on me here and yon, and makes SOS turn pale and then some.

This man is more or less built like a gorilla, and on his face, I see a very fine crop of black whiskers. Also, he has two eyes which glint very much and dangerous. I find myself disliking him very much, and am grateful it is SOS who he is pointing the gun at instead of Gus Givens.

SOS gets to his feet very careful and keeps his hands up high. The black-whiskered gent steps forward and takes SOS' gun from the holster and flings it into a clump of weeds.

Something very familiar in this man's gun belt gives me a peculiar feeling, and I realize that he is wearing my own belt, and I know suddenly that this is none other than Black Tex, who helped himself to my gun after I let him out of jail last night by accident.

It occurs to me then that it would be very nice indeed if I could capture him and collect the five hundred reward, which would fix up everything with Minnie, including the house, and leave me no less than two-fifty smackeroos plus a sawbuck for my own use, only I do not see how I can capture such a character as Black Tex without a gun.

While I ponder the situation, Black Tex holsters my gun and smacks his whiskery lips.

"Friend," he says to SOS, "I am as hungry as a coyote after a hard winter."

He grabs up food and begins to stuff it into his big yap. This is when I get the idea of smacking him on the head with a rock from behind, so I gather up a rock some bigger than my two fists and ease up behind him, keeping myself hid very much so in the brush, which there is no little of. When I am close enough to be sure to hit him where it will do the most good, which is on the back of his head, I take careful aim and let go.

What should happen but at that moment, Black Tex takes a notion to bend over for another helping of grub, and my rock sails neatly over his head and catches SOS in the stomach. The next thing I know, SOS is setting on the ground, looking very much like he has been kicked by a mule, and I am staring into the muzzle of my own six, which Black Tex holds very calm and steady in his right hand.

"So!" he says nasty like and then some. "A bushwhacker!"

I cannot think of a suitable statement to make. Besides, if I could, I can not say

it for my mouth is suddenly very dry, and I feel great drops of sweat running down my face.

"I do not like bushwhackers," he goes on, "so I will pull the trigger and put you out of the way for good and all!"

Just as I am sure I am a goner, I see SOS pick up a stick that has one end in the fire. The glowing end of this stick, SOS presses against the seat of Black Tex's pants with no little force. For a short while, Black Tex has no other thought than for the burning sensation he feels in the back of his lap, and that is when I tie into him with both fists.

Truthfully I cannot say who is the best man, Black Tex or Gus Givens, for while we are going around and around like two tomcats in a rain barrel, SOS gathers up a nice size hunk of granite and lays it across Black Tex's skull. This ends the fight very neat and quick, for Black Tex lets out a deep sigh and falls flat on his whiskers, a position which he does not alter in the least for some time.

SOS and me feel very grateful toward one another, so we shake hands very warm. I explain to him how I let Black Tex out of jail, thinking I am doing it for SOS and old times' sake, and he says as how the sheriff did not lock him in the cooler at all, only telling him to get out of Jackpot promptly, which he did.

WHILE we are talking of these things, I hear the sounds of many horses approaching, so I say hastily:

"SOS, I have knowed posses to shoot first and ask questions after it is too late. So I will now disappear out of sight, while you explain to them how letting Black Tex out of jail was purely accidental on my part.

"Also, you can mention how I tied very fearless into him with bare fists. As soon as everything is settled safely, you give two whistles, and I will return for the reward money.

"Umm, reward money," he murmurs. "Shore, pal," he says. "Yuh just lay low till yuh hear me whistle twice."

So I retire a safe distance and out of sight and keep my ears open for two whistles, which do not come even after a great length of time and then some. At last, feeling all is not well, I make my way carefully back to a spot where I can see what is going on, and I find there is nothing going on. In fact, SOS, Black Tex and the posse are nowhere to be seen.

For some time, I set on a stump, thinking. Then it hits me that I have been given the doublecross by none other than my old pal and buddy, Samuel Overbrook Slocum. This doublecross, I realize, is for the low-down purpose of financial gain, SOS seeing how he can get five hundred smackeroos very easy by forgetting to mention me.

Anger fills me no little, and I throw caution to the wind, remembering how the house needs repairing, and mount my horse and ride like a bat out of you know where for Jackpot.

The farther I ride, the madder I get, and by the time I reach the jail, where there is quite a crowd of men assembled, I can bite the horn off a saddle. I shove through the crowd and get up close to the sheriff's desk in time to hear old Judge Jarvis say:

"Samuel, for yore great act of bravery in capturin' Black Tex, I herewith present yuh with five hundred dol—"

"Hold it!" I yells, and everybody turns wide eyes on me. Also, a number of six-guns, which in my wrath I ignore completely.

SOS pales slightly and looks for a place to hide in, which he does not find. Sheriff Shane glares at me, paws at his mustache, reaches into a drawer of his desk and pulls out a spur. This spur, I see, is the one I have lost.

"Gus Givens," Shane says hoarsely, "consider yoreself under arrest for helping and abetting a criminal! So help me, yuh're the jasper what let him out of jail. Yore spur was found under the window with the buggy ax, an'—"

"Sheriff," I says with honest dignity, "I can explain everything and"—I point a accusing finger at SOS—"he will support my story, and so will Black Tex, unless they are the two biggest liars west of the Mississippi."

Very clearly I go ahead and tell exactly how it is that SOS is a bad influence on me and how I intend to let him out of jail only for old times' sake, but let out Black Tex instead. All this I end up by telling how I very bravely tie into Black Tex with my bare fists, thus saving SOS' worthless life as well as right the wrong I have did

by busting out the jail window.

Judge Jarvis unloads his cud and eyes SOS coldly.

"Samuel," he says, "how about this? Is Gus telling any truth, or is he lying faster than a horse can run?"

"It is mostly truth," SOS admits, "except he did not actually capture Black Tex. I did that when I bounce a rock off his head. Yuh can ask Black Tex about that."

"What SOS says is true, more or less," I admit. "However, it was me who saved the day by—"

"Silence in the courtroom!" Judge Jarvis orders, and spits accurately into the spittoon. "As I see it, yuh both helped capture the varmint. I might add that Black Tex would have likely escaped last night anyway, for he'd loosened them bars considerable from the inside. You, Gus, just saved him a few hours time."

THE judge takes another crack at the spittoon.

"Gentlemen," he continues, "it is only fair to split the reward between Gus and Samuel. However, Gus Givens has committed a very serious crime by busting out a jail window, no matter if it would have been busted anyway. So herewith I fine Gus $250, and the cost of repairing the window, which will be $10."

Very weak and trembling, I reach deep into my pocket and pull out my lone sawbuck and hand it to Judge Jarvis, which is some better than having Minnie come to get me out of jail. He spits again, gives half the reward money to SOS and puts my share with my ten-spot on the desk.

"One more thing," he says, his voice getting edgy, "you boys have exactly fifteen minutes to get out of town. An' yuh are not to come back only one at a time an' then not any oftener than absolutely necessary!"

Sheriff Shane grins, hands me my gun and belt and opens the door.

"Yes, sir," SOS and me say very humble, and we walk out of the jail, climb into our saddles and head out of town.

I am very much worried and then some, knowing that Minnie is sure to hear of all this. In fact, I know I will be in the doghouse very much, and it is all because of SOS being a bad influence on me. And in my pocket there is now only two quarters to jingle, while SOS carries a neat two-fifty in folding money, making me feel there is no justice.

I see no hope for me what-so-ever until it occurs to me that SOS might square me with Minnie by admitting that he is a bad influence and that it is all his fault that things have happened like they have.

But when I mention this to him, he pales slightly, and says:

"Gladly would I cut off my right arm for you, Gus, but I will not face Minnie. She would likely tear me limb from limb and throw the pieces out the window."

This I feel is very unkind of him, and anger fills me completely. I reach over and help myself to his six-gun and point it at him very businesslike.

"For many years," I says, "we have been like brothers. But now between us everything is finished. I would just as leave shoot you as not and a little more so."

"Gus," he says hoarsely, "be careful with that gun! It has got a hair trigger."

"Good!" I says. "And I am somewhat nervous and jumpy."

"Put up that gun," he croaks, "an' I promise I will tell Minnie I am a skunk and a coyote as well as a bad influence."

When we reach my house, Minnie meets us at the front door. She has a broom in one hand and a heavy iron frying pan in the other, while her blue eyes shoot fire and her red mouth is nothing more than a very thin, straight line.

"Gus," she says, "how is it that you are coming home with this very low type cowboy instead of frog legs?"

"Dear," I says quickly, keeping my eye on the frying pan, "SOS will explain everything. Speak, Samuel!"

SOS speaks his piece very nice, and when he is finished, Minnie eyes him with no little contempt, and says flatly:

"A nice story, none of which I will believe without proof."

"Show her the two-fifty reward," I says, and SOS digs out the roll of green.

"I cannot believe there is two hundred and fifty dollars there without counting it," Minnie says coldly, and waves the frying pan very close to SOS' head.

"Count it," he says in a trembling voice.

MINNIE takes the money, which she does not count, but tucks down out

of sight in the neck of her white blouse.

"The way I look at it," she says to SOS, "the money belongs to Gus, for if it had not been for Gus, you would now be dead, which in a way I am sorry you are not, for you are a bad influence and no mistake.

"However, if you make no fuss about letting Gus have his money, I will overlook your shortcomings somewhat and let you go on your way without doing the thing my better judgment tells me to do —namely, beat out your brains with this frying pan!"

SOS' pale eyes are fixed on the swinging frying pan.

"Minnie," he says weakly, "I was just going to suggest that Gus should have that money instead of me. After all, he is a married man with a house what needs fixing up, besides being unlucky in other ways."

"Thank you, Samuel," Minnie says. "And what is Gus' is mine, and you can be assured that Gus and I will think kindly of you as we repair our home."

SOS staggers to his horse, and I look at Minnie and see her smiling, while her fingers feel the lump the money makes under her white blouse. I remember the sawbuck I have lost in this affair, but do not mention it, but marvel at the wonderful wife I have for her business ability.

And then I am suddenly hungry for frog legs and then some.

"Tomorrow," I says hopefully, "I think I will ride to Skunk Creek and go frog hunting."

She snuggles up very close to me, her cornsilk hair tickling my chin very nice.

"Gus," she says softly, "I know how it is with you in the springtime. So tomorrow you can go frog hunting, but not alone. I will go with you!"

This somewhat takes me by surprise and is no little shock, but there is nothing I can do but agree to let her go along, for you cannot tell a wife like Minnie to stay to home. So I put one arm about her, while I jingle my last two quarters with the other hand, thinking maybe it will not be so bad to have her along hunting frogs, after all. For she is a very fine wife, and no mistake.

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?

GREETINGS, folks, here are five more questions tuh test yore knowledge of the West. Each plumb correct reply counts 20%, an' if yuh git 60% or over yuh're a top hand. Try 'em an' let's know how yuh made out. If yuh can't rope the critters, our answers are on Page 107.

1. A cowboy's rope is popularly known by what three other names?
2. What was the year of the first great attempted trail drive from Texas to California?
3. What are tapaderos and why are they used?
4. What is a hogan, who uses them, and of what shape are they and why?
5. A serape is what?

THE BONANZA KING

Cowboy Jim Parrish looked like just another hobo—but when he went to Copperville to masquerade as the wealthy heir of a great mining property, he certainly didn't act like one!

CHAPTER I

The Cowboy Hobo

THE train crew found Jim Parrish riding an empty box when the west bound freight stopped at a water tank. The conductor turned a lantern on him, and the brakeman jabbed at him with his billy. It was a wet night, and both the railroaders were in a sour mood. They figured Jim was just another bum, and that's how they handled him.

They didn't merely tell him to get off. They laid on with their clubs, hard about the head, then, with the train getting underway again, they heaved him from the boxcar. He landed loosely, like a sack only half filled with grain, missing the rocky roadbed ballast, but spilling down into a gully awash with rushing rain water.

The water was a cold shock, jolted away some of the cobwebby unconsciousness, and Jim, gasping first and then groaning, picked himself up and so escaped drowning in that foot-deep water. He stood swaying, hands to head, his brain reeling and his stomach turning over. He'd been sick in that boxcar, sick as a poisoned dog, else those

A Complete Novelet by JOSEPH CHADWICK

Standing in the carriage, Jim swung his gun up and fired

two railroaders wouldn't have been able to jump him.

Poisoned? Well, he'd been drugged, back in that honkatonk at Bismarck. He remembered the card game, the winning hands he'd held, the drinks he'd downed. But he didn't remember much more except that he'd become sleepy, sleepier than he'd ever been in his life. He didn't remember how he'd got shut in that boxcar. He'd been dumped into it while drugged, of course.

He didn't need to remember. Somebody had doped his drink, then they'd cleaned him out. He didn't need to feel in his pockets. His winnings were gone, and so too was the money from the sale of those two hundred Hereford steers. —His boss' money!

Jim Parrish stumbled back to the water tank for shelter, and so was out of the downpour. The wind blew some rain in under the tank, but Jim was already so wet he didn't notice. He slumped down, sat with his back to one of the upright supports, and dozed off. The rain let up some time during the early morning hours, and dawn brought the sun. Jim rose; his head throbbed, his knees threatened to buckle. He was still sick. He was weaker than before he'd slept. He peered about, after stumbling from beneath the tank, and saw unbroken grass flats in every direction. He was in the middle of nowhere.

He peered east along the tracks, then west, and saw nothing but iron rails and wooden ties. No—his hat lay west along the tracks, fifty feet away. Farther away lay his bedroll. He didn't see his bundles, some things he'd bought in Bismarck for the boss', Milt Shard's wife. He guessed the railroaders hadn't pitched them off.

He got his hat and dragged the bedroll back to the water tank. He got out of his clothes, down to his underwear, and hung them over the tank's framework to dry. An eastbound passenger train roared by at noon, when he was putting them on again. It didn't stop to take on water. There was nothing else—no sign of riders or wagons. Jim knew that he had to start hoofing it, but he didn't know which direction would take him to a ranch or a town. And he didn't feel up to walking in the hot sun.

He told himself to wait until sundown, when it was cooler. But in midafternoon, he saw a plume of smoke to the east. The rails began to hum. A westbound passenger train came roaring up, ground to a noisy stop for water.

The fireman climbed onto the tender, pulled down the tank spout. A uniformed trainman got down from one of the coaches, stood on the roadbed with watch in hand. Jim shouldered his bedroll, walked back along the baggage coach and passenger cars. Hopping a passenger wouldn't be easy. There was a six-gun in Jim's bedroll, but a gun wouldn't pay a man's fare—except to the nearest town's jail. Jim figured he'd duck around the end coach and maybe find a way to get aboard unseen on the opposite side. But a couple of men—passengers—were watching from the rear platform of the end coach.

One man said, suddenly, "Hey, you—you, tramp!"

Jim looked up scowling. He saw two men. One was fat, pink-cheeked, pompous, and prosperous looking, like a big town banker or merchant. "You want a ride somewhere?" he asked.

"Sure; to the nearest town."

"Maybe you'd want a job," the fat man went on. "Say, at five dollars a day."

Jim thought, "More tinhorns!" He had had enough of such men, considering what had happened last evening back in that deadfall. But he was afoot, stranded in empty and unfamiliar country. If this fat man wanted to pay his fare, it would be all right to string along with him to the next town. But he was too wise to fall for any five-dollar-a-day offer. Jobs like that weren't offered to cowhands who worked for forty a month and food. Without committing himself, he said, "Sounds good."

"Then come aboard."

Jim said, "Thanks," and tossed his bedroll up onto the platform. When he followed, the two men sort of shied away from him. He guessed he did look like a tramp, for his clothes were covered with dried mud. The fat man's face was florid, heavily jowled, webbed over with tiny purple veins, but shrewd. The other man was about ten years younger, maybe forty; rail-thin, pale faced,

servile. To Jim, he looked like an office worker or a store clerk. The thin man coughed, as though to attract attention.

"This is Mr. Jarrett, Lyle Jarrett," he said. "Mr. Jarrett is attorney for the Consolidated Copper Company." He grinned, showing buck teeth. "The CCC," he went on. "I'm Willis Blake—" it almost sounded like Willis Blank, the timid way he said it—"secretary to Mr. Carlin, who owns Consolidated." He peered at Jim, watery eyes blinking. "And you?"

"Jim Parrish."

"No occupation, of course?"

"Cowhand."

"Out here?" Blake said. He peered out over the empty grassland. "I see no cows or horses or ranch."

Jim said, "It's a long story. You wouldn't be interested. But I'm no tramp or hobo. If you can't use a cowhand in this job of yours—"

The fat man, Jarrett, broke in, "No matter, Parrish. No matter, at all." The train gave a lurch, started rolling. "Come inside, friend, and we'll talk this over."

JIM PARRISH had never seen anything like it. It was a private coach. He had heard there were such things for big railroad officials and millionaire mining kings, but he hadn't believed it. Scrollwork and gilt, velvet upholstery, braid and tassels, carpets with floral designs—the gaudiness hit a cowpoke in the eyes. There was a big nickel-trimmed stove. There was a writing table, strewn with papers. There was a small table loaded with bottles and glasses. And this was but part of the coach. About half of it, the other end, was hidden by a partition and a closed door. Near the drink-laden table, a man lounged in an armchair. He had a half-emptied glass in his hand. He looked half drunk.

Lyle Jarrett said, pompously, "Mr. Carlin, Mr. Parrish."

Jim said, "Howdy, Mr. Carlin."

Carlin said, "A drink, friend?" And drank, himself.

Jarrett pointed to a chair, and Jim seated himself. The fat man pulled up another chair, sat down, folded his pudgy hands across his expanse of middle. He was smiling, but his eyes were veiled. Willis Blake hovered behind him. They ignored Carlin. Carlin ignored them, for his drink. He was a young man, about Jim's own age, twenty-eight, and he had sandy hair and a wispy mustache. He grinned at his glass.

"He's always like that," Jarrett said.

"Take it away from him," Jim suggested.

"He's harder to handle, without it," Jarrett explained. "Here's the idea, Parrish. It came to me, in a flash, when I first saw you. Carlin has got to appear at a mining town in Montana, at Copperville, where his biggest property is located. He's got to show himself there because there's been trouble. Carlin inherited the Company from his father. Old Sam Carlin was—well, a man. If he were alive, he'd end the Copperville trouble easily. But that's the sort of son he left behind. Phil's never been West before, and he doesn't care a hoot. One look at him, and the town of Copperville will have more trouble."

Jim felt uneasy, with Jarrett talking like that, in front of Phil Carlin. But Carlin said, "He's right, old boy, quite right." He talked in a cultured way, as though he'd been educated in England.

"What's the job?" Jim asked.

"Like I said, the idea came in a flash," Jarrett went on. "We'll dress you up, Parrish, and introduce you as Phil Carlin. You're more the kind of man a mining town fancies."

"If we can get away with it."

Carlin broke in, "Oh, you'll get away with it. Lyle Jarrett is a bloody shrewd one. He'll keep me out of sight, aboard this car. A prisoner, eh? But with plenty of liquid nourishment, however."

Jim stared at him. "You agree to it, Carlin?"

"Rather. It'd save me a great deal of unpleasantness."

"And I get five dollars a day?"

"As long as you last," Jarrett said, blandly. "You accept?"

Jim fell silent, thinking it over. Because he had tried to paint the town red, back in Bismarck, he'd lost the money from the sale of Milt Shard's herd. Six thousand dollars. At five dollars a day, he could pay back some part of that

money. Maybe, with what he earned, he could buck the tiger in some Copperville gambling house and make a killing—and pay back the whole six thousand. He knew how badly Milt needed that money. And he sure couldn't go back to the ranch without it. Jim was still deep in thought when a new voice said, "You'd be a fool to accept, stranger."

A woman stood in the now open doorway connecting with the other part of the coach. Jim Parrish stared. The woman was young, blonde and lovely. Phil Carlin looked around at her, showing his vacant grin. Willis Blake stole a quick glance. Lyle Jarrett puffed out his florid cheeks, and growled, "Now, Rita. That's unfair."

"It is?"

"You know it, my dear."

"All right, then. I'll be fair." She laughed without amusement, laughter as brittle sounding as breaking glass. She gazed squarely at Jim. "You'd be a fool not to accept," she told him, and withdrew slamming the door.

CHAPTER II

Style on Wheels

THE door led to a narrow hallway that reached to the other end of the coach. There were windows to the left, Jim Parrish saw, and a half-dozen doors to the right. Each door opened into a tiny compartment, like the one into which Lyle Jarrett showed Jim. This one was was furnished with a bunk-bed, a chair, a washstand; it was also littered with trunks and traveling bags. Jarrett said, "Phil's room. His clothes. Pick out whatever you'd like to wear. He's got plenty. You can throw your old clothes out the window. The porter will bring you water, and you can wash up and shave."

He pulled the door closed, leaving Jim alone—but not for long. A colored man wearing a white coat came with a pitcher of hot water. He rolled surprised eyes at Jim, and got out fast.

Jim stripped, but he didn't cast his clothes from the window. Figuring that he'd need them again, later, he opened his bedroll and placed the shabby clothes inside it. Making up the roll again, he left out his six-gun. He found a bar of soap that smelled like a fancy woman's perfume, and Phil Carlin's razor, and set about washing and shaving. Clean and toweled, he turned to Carlin's enormous wardrobe.

Jim selected a suit of fine gray broadcloth, a white silk shirt, a black string tie, and a pair of dark brown shoes. There were half a dozen hats, one a broad-brimmed, flat-crowned gray Stetson that looked as though it had yet to be worn. It seemed to be the only special article of clothing Carlin had acquired for the trip West. It made Jim feel less self-conscious about the rest of the dudish outfit. But everything fitted.

Jim listened to the clickety-clacking of the wheels, looked out of the window and saw that the train was still speeding across the Dakota prairies. It was still his country, but he didn't know what part of it. He turned back to the washstand, took up his gun. He had left his cartridge belt and holster in the bedroll, so the weapon had to be carried in the waistband of his new jeans. He buttoned the coat, and there wasn't much of a bulge.

He left the compartment, glanced at the other doors and wondered which room the girl Rita occupied. He was curious about her. She was too young for fat Lyle Jarrett, certainly too rich for Willis Blake's blood, so she must be aboard because of Phil Carlin. Jim went on to the lounge section, still feeling uncomfortable in the fine clothes. Cowhands would have joshed him for being dressed up like a city dude, but these three men saw nothing odd about it. Jarrett and Blake were now busy at the desk, and the fat man merely said, "You'll do, Parrish." Carlin was at the small table, mixing a fresh drink. He said, "My tailor did a good job for you, old boy."

He offered Jim a filled glass.

Jim shook his head. "Not on an empty stomach, thanks."

"You're hungry?"

"Haven't had chuck since yesterday."

"We'll remedy that," said Carlin. "Willis, ring for the porter."

More and more, Jim realized that being a copper king had its good points. He was served a fine meal, brought by the porter from one of the cars up ahead. The main dish was a big steak, and in the gravy were what Phil Carlin said were mushrooms. Jarrett and Blake worked at the desk while Jim ate, but Phil Carlin seemed curious and asked Jim questions about his being a cowhand. Jim talked as he ate; he told Carlin about cattle raising and bronco-busting. He got around to his boss, old Milt Shard, and then onto his trouble at Bismarck.

"So somebody slipped you a drugged drink," Carlin said, "and robbed you of your winnings."

Jim nodded, glumly. "Along with six thousand dollars belonging to my boss," he said. "That's why I took this loco job with you gents. I've got to do the honest thing, and try to pay Milt back."

"Couldn't you go to the law?"

"Not a chance," Jim said. "Those tinhorns would deny everything. It'd be my word against theirs, and I'd passed out when my money was taken. I couldn't even point out the man who robbed me."

Carlin said, "Too bad." And Jim was forming a better opinion of him. Phil Carlin might hit the bottle too much, but he wasn't as much of a fool as Jarrett and Blake made out. All that ailed the young man, no doubt, was too much money. His wispy mustache and receding chin gave him a weakish look, yet he was handsome enough, and likeable. But Carlin's interest had flagged. He reached for his drink.

"Why don't you quit that stuff?" Jim asked.

"I'd die of boredom, old chap."

"Haven't you got work to do?"

Carlin shook his head. "Jarrett and Blake take care of it," he replied. "Besides, the company has offices at Copperville and in New York, with dozens of people. Nothing for me to do, really."

"What about this trouble at Copperville?"

"A nuisance, that," Carlin said. "It seems there was an explosion and a fire at the mine, about a month ago. Some miners were killed, some others hurt. Too bad, of course. But what can I do about it?" He looked helplessly at Jim, as though wanting to be told what he could do. "It seems that the other miners refused to go back to work until the Company promised to bring the owners, meaning me, out to talk with them. They have some demands to make of me."

"You should be able to handle such trouble."

"I've led a sheltered life," Carlin said, with a wry grin. "And miners, I'm told, are hard to deal with. Lucky Sam Carlin would have known how to handle this sort of thing. But he raised me—" he looked shamefaced now—"a gentleman. A pampered fool of a gentleman."

"But your father's dead now, Carlin."

"Meaning what, old boy?"

"Meaning that now you can live your own life."

"And I do just that," said Phil Carlin, reaching for his glass. "Have a drink with me, Jim?"

JIM had a drink with him, then went out to the rear platform. He watched the countryside drop away behind the speeding train. He saw grazing cattle in the distance, and once, not far-off, ranch buildings. It was hillier country now, grassy valleys and timbered slopes. Jim had no way of judging how far he had traveled on the freight, but he had a hazy idea that he'd been in that boxcar from early evening until nine or ten o'clock. If the freight had pulled out of Bismarck soon after he was thrown into it, then he must have traveled fifty or sixty miles before being dumped off at that water tank.

He'd been aboard the passenger train about two hours—the sun was now setting—and that meant another fifty miles, at least. He was more than a hundred miles from Bismarck. And Milt Shard's ranch was fifty miles south of the town. By now, Milt would be worrying about his six thousand dollars. Jim felt pretty low in his mind.

The door opened, and the girl Rita stepped out onto the platform. She was a tall girl, slim but rounded, with tawny blonde hair and a high firm breast. Her eyes were green-flecked. Jim wasn't sure, but he had a suspicion that she

used powder and paint—like a honka-tonk girl. She wasn't as young as he'd first thought. She was maybe twenty-five or six, a mature woman, and a desirable one. She gave Jim a bold look, a half smile.

"Well," she said, her voice pleasantly husky. "Well, well." She was laughing at him. "Those clothes do something for Phil Carlin, but you do something for them. There's a difference. I'm Rita Shannon, in case you care. They—" she tossed her head toward the door—"told me you're a cowboy, and that your name is Jim Parrish."

"That's not how they want it, though."

"No. They want you to be a copper king named Phil Carlin."

Jim watched her warily, feeling somehow that he had to be on guard against her. He'd never before seen a woman so handsome. He said, "I guess you don't like the idea."

The girl laughed shortly. "Maybe I'll get used to the idea," she said. "But it puzzles me a little. You see, I'm to marry Phil Carlin. And if you're to be Phil Carlin, just where do I stand?"

Jim didn't see anything funny in that, so kept silent.

Rita Shannon went on, "Phil says he likes you. That's good, because he doesn't like many people. Liking you, he's apt to trust you."

"So?"

"Well, he may be making a mistake—trusting you," Rita replied. "Everybody he trusts is out to get something from him." Her smile was an odd one, now. "That goes for me, too. I'm an actress, Jim. Not a very successful one. I've been poor all my life, awfully poor. If I marry Phil Carlin, it'll be because I want a rich husband."

Jim frowned, and asked, "What are you getting at?"

Rita shrugged. "It's just that I don't like this business of you posing as Phil Carlin. Not because of you, exactly, but because of Lyle Jarrett. I don't think he's to be trusted. He may be pulling something that may do himself a lot of good and Phil a lot of harm." She turned and faced Jim squarely, very much in earnest. "Look; it might pay you in the end to side Phil against Lyle Jarrett, if it comes to that. You see—"

The door opened again, and Lyle Jarrett came out. He was puffing on a cigar. His eyes flicked over the girl, as chill and hard as steel. But he smiled blandly, and said, "Tomorrow this time, we'll be in Copperville."

Jim could see Rita Shannon shy away, and sort of wilt.

AT Butte, Montana, late the next afternoon, the private coach was cut from the westbound train and shunted by shifter engine onto a branch line. It was coupled to a combination freight and passenger train that headed south. The train labored through mountains, passed mining towns, rattled over bridges. Jarrett announced that it was an hour and a half trip to Copperville. The fat man was nervous; he kept pacing the floor. Willis Blake was also jumpy; the little man always borrowed Jarrett's mood.

Phil Carlin was drunk, and still drinking heavily. Rita Shannon sat staring from a window, tapping the floor with the toe of a slipper. She was elegantly dressed, ready, no doubt, to descend at Copperville. She wore a green velvet suit of the latest Eastern fashion, with form-fitting bodice and billowy skirt. Her hat was wide-brimmed and gay with artificial flowers. She wore white gloves, held a green hand-bag. Phil Carlin had said, mockingly, "You'll do me proud in Copperville, my dear." It had made Rita flush.

Finally the engine whistled, warning that the town was just ahead. Lyle Jarrett said edgily, "This is the test, Parrish. The town knows that you, Phil Carlin, are coming. It's a holiday in Copperville, because everybody wants to welcome Lucky Sam Carlin's son. You'll not do any talking except when I give you the sign. In fact, I'll be with you every minute—to put the words into your mouth."

"Suppose somebody guesses the truth?" Jim asked.

"Nobody will," Jarrett told him, but not with too much conviction. "Nobody out here has ever seen Lucky Sam's son. You just be careful you don't talk out of turn and give it away."

"Stop squirming, Lyle," Phil Carlin

said. "Jim'll be all right."

Rita jumped up, and was almost hysterical. "I don't like it," she said, and she was talking to Phil Carlin. "You should be doing this. What kind of a man are you, anyway? What would Lucky Sam Carlin think of—"

Carlin silenced her with a gesture. "Calm down, my dear," he said, his voice thick with whiskey. "You've got nothing to complain about. Haven't you noticed that Jim is a good substitute for me?"

The girl said, begged, "Phil, please."

The train came to a jolting stop, at Copperville station.

Holiday for Copperville, it might be. But smoke rolled from a smelter west of town, a brownish vapor that put a sulphurous bite in the air all the way here to the station. The pall hung over the town, an ugly town between bleak raw hills. Nothing green grew anywhere that Jim Parrish could see. But he had no time to look at the town Lucky Sam Carlin had founded a score of years and more ago. Its people swarmed about the station, would have overrun the private coach had it not been for a rigging of rope running about the posts supporting the platform roof. Crazy, it seemed to Jim Parrish—for these people were yelling for a man they'd never seen. And might never see.

Jim was on the coach platform now, waving Phil Carlin's gray hat. Lyle Jarrett was telling him what to do. "Smile, Parrish. You're glad to be here —See? Smile!"

Jim smiled. He felt like a fool. He felt guilty. These good people of Copperville—women and children as well as men—were being fooled. They were being swindled by a masquerade. Jim didn't like it, but he smiled. He was getting five dollars a day to be a copper king.

A brass band, its members in blue uniforms, was blasting away but could hardly be heard above the noise of the crowd. Some well-dressed and important appearing men waited on the platform, in a group aloof from the mob, and Jarrett led Jim down to meet them. The names and titles of these officials were a little hazy to him, but he shook hands all around.

One stout man said, "A banquet at the New Copperville House is first on the program. The parade will take us there, Mr. Carlin."

There were carriages, and Jim found himself in one with Rita Shannon. The girl was smiling. It wasn't a happy smile. Jim guessed she too was thinking that this was a fraud. "Drat a weakling like Phil Carlin," he thought. He said it aloud without realizing that he did, and Rita said, "If only I could change him!"

"Too late," Jim told her.

The procession started out, the brass band in the lead, and more people lined the main street on both sides. A big banner was stretched midway across the street, from one false-fronted building to another, and read: Copperville Welcomes Lucky Sam Carlin's Son!

The crowd yelled, cheered. Jim waved his hat, and Rita smiled. A red-shirted miner shouted, "Glad you came, bucko!" A worn-looking woman shrieked, "Now we folks'll get a square deal!"

Half a dozen riders loped back and forth shooting off six-guns and yelping like drunken cowboys.

A slug ripped and tore through the carriage.

Rita cried out, "What was that?" The driver, a colored man in livery, twisted about, stared wide-eyed.

The second bullet came so close Jim heard the shriek of it. The third was still too close; it creased one of the team across the rump, and the horse snorted and reared high. Jim already had his gun out, and the crowd began to realize something was wrong. It wasn't the half-dozen loping riders; they aimed their guns skyward. Then Jim saw the man, and swung his six-gun up. This part of the celebration a cowhand could tackle.

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CHAPTER III

Jim Starts a Gun Job

CROUCHED behind the false-front on the roof of a two-storied saloon building just ahead was the bushwhacker. He had a rifle. The range was short, but his marksmanship was bad. Jim, however, wasn't counting on him missing a fourth shot. Standing in the carriage, Jim swung his gun up. He fired twice. The first shot made the rifleman rear up; the second made him stagger to the edge of the roof and come tumbling down. The crowd and the band were silent now, and in the hush there was an ugly sodden thud as the rifleman struck the ground. He landed in a heap, sprawled out, did not move.

Jim looked about, trying to locate other gunmen or other roofs. He saw none, so jumped from the carriage and crossed the fifty feet of space to where the man lay. A couple other men—miners—got there ahead of him.

"Dead?" Jim asked.

"Dead, all right," a miner said. "Mr. Carlin, that was some shooting. Lucky Sam never did better, even in his prime."

"Yeah. But who is he?"

"One of the Maughers. Young Jess, it looks like."

Jim started to ask who the Maughers were, but now the crowd was pushing in. Somebody grabbed Jim's arm, tried to pull him away. It was Lyle Jarrett, his beefy face grayish. "Let's get out of here! This is bad. Bad!" He was sweating. "Come on—"

"Hold on, Jarrett," Jim muttered. "I don't like this. You let me stumble into a gun-trap without any warning. Jarrett, you—"

"I'll explain later," Jarrett said. "Soon as we get clear of this."

"Now, Jarrett!"

"I didn't expect anything like that. I swear it."

"For five dollars a day—"

"Shhh!" Jarrett cautioned, and pulled Jim away from the crowd.

The banquet in the dining-room of the New Copperville House was attended by about forty people, the town's important men and their ladies. The mayor and the councilmen, the mine superintendent and foremen, a couple of executives from Consolidated's local office. No miners were present. There was plenty of food and drinks, and too much talk. Half a dozen men made speeches.

Lyle Jarrett got up and talked for Jim Parrish—for Phil Carlin. He explained that Mr. Carlin was too shaken by what had happened on the street to make a speech. It lasted for nearly three hours, that meal, and Jim began to understand why a man could be bored with being a copper king.

He was lauded, by one orator after another, because he had outshot Jess Maugher and because he was believed to be Lucky Sam's son. When it was finally over, Jim was glad to get away from such fawning people. He preferred his own sort, cowhands and ranch folk; he would have been more at ease with the miners. But Lyle Jarrett told the mine superintendent, a dour-faced man named Walker, "Mr. Carlin will meet with the workers tomorrow."

When Jim asked why that meeting should be postponed, Jarrett explained, "The company has arranged for free drinks and food, for everybody. No use spoiling the holiday by talking business."

He sent Willis Blake off somewhere, after a whispered conversation, then led Jim and Rita up the broad staircase in the lobby. It was a gilt and plush hotel, unlike any Jim had seen in cowtowns, a fine place that Lucky Sam Carlin had built shortly before his death two years past. It was a three-storied brick building, and the fore part of the third floor was reserved, constantly, for the use of Lucky Sam's heir.

It turned out to be an elegantly furnished suite with four bedrooms and baths and a big parlor. Rita exclaimed over it. It was clear that she loved gaudiness and luxury. The luggage had already been brought from the private coach, and Jim was a little surprised to see all of Phil Carlin's trunks and bags in the room he was to occupy. He wondered what Carlin, penned up in the railroad coach, would do for clothing.

But he was wondering about other things, and faced Jarrett and the girl there in the parlor. He said, "You've got some explaining to do. Who's Jess Maugher?"

Rita put in, "Yes! What's going on? I was almost killed!"

Jarrett squirmed. He mopped his heavy face with a handkerchief. "It's a long story, and I don't know all of it myself," he said. "It began in the old days, before Lucky Sam Carlin struck it rich in copper. He'd always prospected for gold and silver, in partnership with a man named Maugher. Purd Maugher. But they had a fall-out, just before Lucky Sam found the copper deposit here in the gulch. What the fall-out was about, Lucky Sam never said. But it didn't grow into a feud until after Sam got his mine going.

"He was getting rich, hand over fist. And Purd Maugher didn't like it. Envious. He claimed that a partnership agreement existed between him and Lucky Sam—an agreement they'd made when they started prospecting. According to Maugher, they were to share equally any strike either made. He made out that Lucky Sam Carlin reneged."

"Did he?" Jim wanted to know.

"I don't know about that," Jarrett replied. "All I know is that Lucky Sam denied there'd been any such agreement. He claimed that the partnership was called off when the two of them had their fall-out. Maugher took it into court, but he hadn't a leg to stand on. There was a gunfight a couple of weeks later. Maugher forced it. Lucky Sam wounded him in the arm. This was twenty-five or more years ago."

JARRETT went on to explain how Lucky Sam Carlin had been shot twice from ambush—by Purd Maugher, though it was never proved—but both times recovered from his wounds. It had been because of Maugher that Lucky Sam took his wife and child East to live; he had been afraid that Maugher would harm them. Purd Maugher didn't forget his grudge; it had become an obsession, and he'd taught his three wild sons, as they grew up, to hate Lucky Sam Carlin.

There had been attacks made on Carlin property over the years; fires of mysterious origin and explosions that could only have been deliberately set off. The Consolidated Mine's payroll was always brought in from Butte, and half a dozen times it had been stolen in hold-ups by masked men. Purd Maugher and his sons were suspected, but nothing had ever been proved against them.

"That's as much as I know about it," Jarrett finished. "I figured that the feud was buried with Lucky Sam."

"That better be the truth," Jim muttered.

"It is. I swear it," Jarrett said uneasily. "I talked to Hank Walker, the mine superintendent, at the banquet. He said that today was the first time he'd seen any of the Maughers around since Lucky Sam's death."

"With Jess dead, there'll be more trouble."

Jarrett said, "Yes," in a thin voice, and mopped some more at his face.

He looked genuinely worried, and Jim was convinced that he hadn't known that Jess Maugher was on the prod. Jim said, "I don't like the idea of being a target, Jarrett. Not even for five dollars a day."

The fat man said, "But if you quit us now, Parrish, with the whole town thinking you are Phil Carlin. . . Look; I'll raise it to ten dollars a day. And I'll take steps to protect you from further attempts on your life. I'll talk to the town marshal and—"

The door opened, and Willis Blake came bustling in. The little man was breathless, excited. "Lyle, I went back to the private coach," he gasped. "Phil's not there. He's gone off somewhere!"

Jarrett stared, mouth agape. Rita Shannon uttered a startled cry.

"The clothes he was wearing," Blake went on. "He left them behind. He couldn't have got any others, because his luggage was brought here. What'll we do? What do you think he's up to?"

Jarrett's alarm turned to anger. He muttered an oath, told Blake to search the town. Rita Shannon slowly began to smile, as though she approved of what Phil Carlin had done. Jim remembered that he had left his bedroll in the coach, and he guessed that Carlin had rigged himself out in the clothes rolled up in the blankets. Jim decided to keep quiet

about that. Phil Carlin must have become tired of being a pampered dude, and he had a right to do as he liked for once. Jarrett chased Blake out to search the town, and then the sour-looking mine superintendent, Hank Walker, came striding into the parlor.

"There's the devil to pay," he announced. "The Maughers have heard that Jess is dead, and they're on their way to town. Old Purd sent word that he wants to see Phil Carlin!"

Jarrett groaned.

"You gents give the word—make it an order—and I'll round up some good fighting men," Walker said. "We'll wipe out that no-good crowd. But I want somebody else to shoulder the responsibility."

Jarrett was in another sweat. He was a quick-witted lawyer, but now he didn't know what to say. It was clear that he'd never come up against a situation like this back East. Finally he looked at Jim, and said, "It's up to you. The decision's yours. You tell Walker to go ahead."

Jim frowned. He saw what Jarrett was trying to do. The fat man didn't want the responsibility; he was forcing it on Jim, not on Phil Carlin, but on Jim Parrish! If there was trouble about it afterward, Carlin would be in the clear, and Jim Parrish would be in a tight spot. Jim wasn't going to play that sort of a game. He wasn't going to tell Walker to take some gunmen and ambush the Maughers, not even though he was posing as Phil Carlin.

Jim said, "I'll see Purd Maugher."

Jarrett gasped, "You'll what—?"

"You heard me," Jim said. "I killed Jess, so I'll tell Purd why. But I don't want anybody else in on it. You understand that, Jarrett? I'll talk to the Maughers—alone!"

"Well, have it your way."

Jim turned to Hank Walker. "How soon will they get here?"

"Any minute now."

Jim picked up his hat. He drew his gun, checked its loads. He had fired two shots at Jess Maugher, and he always kept the hammer down on an empty chamber. That left him only three shots. But Walker wore a gun under his coat, and Jim said, "Give me some of your cartridges."

After loading the gun, he crossed to the door. Rita called, "Jim—" He paused, looked at her. She said, "Be careful." Her eyes had a frightened look. Hank Walker was frowning. Lyle Jarrett still wiped at his face. He didn't say anything. He seemed lost in thought. Jim went out.

The New Copperville House didn't have a porch and a wooden awning like a cowtown hotel. Its wide entrance had glass doors, and broad stone steps, three of them, led down to the sidewalk. Jim stood on the bottom step, and waited. It was growing dark, but many of the townspeople, still in a holiday mood, were lingering on the streets. They weren't noisy now, and they kept their distance, most staying on the opposite side of the street from the hotel. It was clear that the town had heard about the Maughers' plan to come to Copperville.

One man did come up to Jim, the town marshal. Marshal Burke was a rangy, leathery-faced man with a droopy gray mustache. He looked, to Jim Parrish, as though he'd been a cowhand at one time or another. He wore boots and spurs, a black Stetson. He was bowlegged. The law badge was pinned to his coat.

"Now, Mr. Carlin," he drawled, "you'd better let me handle the Maughers. You were lucky with Jess, but with three against you—Well, they hate your sight for being Lucky Sam's son, and it's clear they mean to get you. Jess missed you because he'd been drinking all day. A bad one, Jess was, downright ornery. But he wasn't as bright as his pa and Russ and Bart. You go inside. I'll talk with them."

"Talk won't stop them, Marshal," Jim said. "And if you can't pin any crime on them, you can't take away their guns and lock them up. You got makings? I haven't had a smoke for a couple days."

The lawman dug tobacco sack, papers, a match from his pocket. He handed them over and gazed narrowly at Jim while he rolled and lighted his cigarette. When Jim handed back the makings, the older man said, "You're sure a surprise to me, Mr. Carlin. You don't seem like an Easterner or a big city man. And the way you outshot Jess Maugher. . . ."

Jim saw the people across the street staring down-street. He let his gaze follow theirs, and he saw three riders coming along at a slow walk. They were still a block away. They were leading a spare horse, and something blanket-covered was tied across it. That something had the shape of a dead man.

Jim drew hard on his cigarette, and said, "Marshal, here come the Maughers."

CHAPTER IV

A Man for the Miners

MARSHAL BURKE muttered a mild oath, whirled about, and would have gone to intercept the Maughers had not Jim caught his arm. "Keep out of it, Marshal," Jim ordered. His voice sounded a little jumpy to his own ears. He braced himself, there on the bottom step, watching the slow approach of the three live and one dead Maughers. Old Purd Maugher was maybe sixty, but a burly sort.

He had a rusty beard, a big beak of a nose. One of the sons was big and red like Purd, the other was small of stature and dark skinned. Both were in need of a razor, but they were not bearded beyond a heavy bristle. They swung their mounts toward Jim, halted in the middle of the street. They were tough and ugly looking. All three were armed with six-guns and rifles.

"Carlin?" Old Purd said, his gaze knife-sharp.

"If you're looking for the man who shot Jess, you've found him."

"You hiding behind Marshal Burke?"

"The marshal came here of his own accord—and he's standing behind me, not in front of me," Jim retorted. "I didn't know about you Maughers, because I'd never been here before. Jess was up on a roof, and he took three shots at me. He blamed near hit a woman. I fired in self-defense without knowing who was shootng at me."

Old Purd growled, "I know about it. If it'd been different, I'd have come after you with a gun in my hand. But Jess went off half-cocked, because he was drunk. I'd told him to stay away from you, until I had a chance to see you."

"You see me now, Purd," Jim said. "What do you want?"

"I'm giving you a chance to be more sensible than Lucky Sam Carlin was," Purd Maugher told him. "He cheated me and mine out of a half share in his copper mine. We had a partnership agreement, and so long as I'm alive I mean to claim what belongs to me. I'll give you until tomorrow sundown to give me a square deal. If you turn out to be a blackleg like Lucky Sam Carlin, you'll be in for trouble—plenty of trouble."

He gigged his horse about, led the others on out Main Street. Jim dropped his quirly butt, ground it under his heel. He looked at Marshal Burke, and asked, "Did you know Lucky Sam in the old days?"

"Knew him well."

"Did we have a partnership agreement with Old Purd?"

Burke nodded. "But Purd Maugher did him dirt," he said. "Stole some money from him. That ended the partnership, so the agreement to share any luck with each other doesn't hold. Maugher is a sneaky sort who's always after something for nothing. He'll cause you trouble sure."

Jim went back into the hotel, and Rita was waiting for him at the top of the stairs on the third floor. She caught hold of his arm, asked, "It's all right, Jim?" He saw relief flood her eyes when he said, "Nothing for you to worry about."

He went inside, told Jarrett and Walker about the Maughers' ultimatum. Hank Walker said, "Well, it's trouble," and departed. Jarrett paced to and fro, puffing on a cigar, looking merely thoughtful rather than worried.

"They'll start the feud all over again," he muttered, "once you turn them down." He halted, faced Jim. "I've no right to ask you to risk it, Parrish. Lucky Sam Carlin lived for years in fear of his life. I can't ask you to take the same risk. It's not your game."

"What are you getting at?"

"I think you'd better get out of town," Jarrett said. "I'll pay you for the two days you've been with us—and give you

a hundred dollars extra. You can get a horse and slip out of town under cover of dark."

"Won't that leave you in the lurch?"

"It'll be all right, as soon as Blake locates Phil Carlin."

"How so?" Jim wanted to know. "How will that make it all right?"

"We'll have to explain to the town that we had you pose as Carlin because we feared the Maughers," Jarrett said. "That's reasonable. Nobody will guess that we didn't expect the Maughers to make trouble."

Jim felt suspicion glide into his mind. He saw that Rita was gazing at Jarrett with bewilderment. He said, "That'd put me in the clear, sure. But what about Phil? He'd be out front when the Maughers start their dirty work. He wouldn't have as much chance against them as I would. Why, you're apt to get him killed!" He shook his head. "I'm staying, Jarrett. I like that ten dollars a day. Besides, I'm kind of fond of that helpless dude. I'd hate to see him hurt. I'm staying on until he turns up—and tells me to leave."

Jarrett's heavy face tightened up. He seemed ready to argue, but apparently thought better of it. He grabbed up his hat and went out, slamming the door. Rita Shannon still looked bewildered.

She said, "Jim, I'm glad you're staying. He's up to something."

Jim nodded. "Looks as though he wants Phil to be a target for the Maughers. We've got to find the dude. If Blake doesn't locate him, I'll go hunting for him later tonight."

JIM spent two hours hunting Phil Carlin, going from one saloon and honkatonk to another without any luck. When he got back to the hotel, at midnight, he saw Lyle Jarrett and Willis Blake in the bar off the lobby. They had their heads together, and looked worried. Jim knew then that Blake hadn't had any luck, either.

He went upstairs without being seen by the pair, and only one lamp was burning in the parlor. It was turned low, and most of the wide room was in deep shadow. Jim went to the door of Rita's bedroom, and knocked. She came to the door with a lacy negligee pulled over her nightgown. Her tawny hair hung at her shoulders in attractive disarray. Jim felt his pulse speed up.

"No luck," he said. "I looked in every saloon in town."

"I'm worried, Jim."

He studied her. "I guess you'll be marrying him for more than his money," he said. "You're in love with him."

She shook her head, lowered her gaze. "I'm not going to marry him," she said. "It wouldn't be fair to him. Besides, I've fallen for another man. For the first time in my life, I've found a man I really care about."

Jim frowned, not liking that. But he said nothing.

Another voice, across the shadowy room, said, "She means you, Jim. You're pretty slow at catching on."

Rita gasped. Jim swung about. Phil Carlin was seated in a high-backed armchair in a far corner. He had been there all the while. He rose and came forward. He was clad in Jim's untidy range clothes from boots to hat, and, somehow, he wore them with a jaunty air. Maybe he was as drunk as usual, but he seemed sober enough. He was grinning, stiffly.

"Lyle Jarrett gave you my name," he said. "It wasn't enough. You had to have my girl, too."

Rita said, "Phil, Jim didn't cross you up—with me. He's been fighting your fight, and almost got himself killed. He even—"

"I know what happened," Carlin broke in. "I've been all around town. In these clothes, I can go anywhere and not be noticed. Men talk to me as though I'm one of them. That's a mighty nice thing. The only trouble is, my so-called friends betray me while I'm enjoying myself!"

Jim was shaken by Rita's admission and Carlin's accusation. But he managed to say, "You're talking to the wrong people, Phil. Jarrett is the one who's betraying you. He wants to get rid of me and put you out front when the Maughers go on the prod."

Fear leapt into Carlin's eyes. "I knew it," he muttered. "I can't trust anybody!"

He turned toward the door. Jim grabbed him by the arm. "Where are

you going, Phil?"

Carlin whirled on him, grunting an oath. He broke loose of Jim's grip. Struck out. It was a savage blow, and so unexpected that Jim was caught off guard. It slammed into his face, blinded him, reeled him back. He collided with a chair, lost his balance, went crashing down onto his back. Rita screamed. The door slammed, after Phil Carlin. Jim picked himself up, slowly, and he was dazed. He started toward the door, but Rita clung to him. "Let him go," she begged. "Please!"

"I'm not letting him get away with that!"

"You've got to, Jim!" the girl wailed. "Don't you see? It's the first time in his life he's acted like a man. Let him go on acting like that. Maybe it'll change him—all for the better!"

Her arms were tight about Jim, her body soft and warm against his, but he put her away. No matter how he felt, or she felt, Rita Shannon was still Phil Carlin's girl. Jim was not going to cross up the man, in any way.

They didn't tell Lyle Jarrett about Carlin's midnight visit, in the morning. Jim and the girl had agreed to keep that from the lawyer, because of their flimsy suspicions of him. Whether Phil Carlin believed it or not, the two of them were on his side. Willis Blake was sent out, by Jarrett, to renew his search for the copper king as soon as he'd had breakfast. And Jarrett told Jim with poorly concealed resentment, "Since you're bound to stay on, and Phil's still missing, you'll have to meet with a delegation of miners this morning."

Jim nodded.

Jarrett went on, "They'll make outlandish demands. I'll tip you off on which you're to grant them. We're not giving them the world with a fence around it. You understand?"

Jim nodded again.

Hank Walker brought the miners, half a dozen burly men who appeared uncomfortable in the glaring elegance of the parlor. Jim shook hands with each of them, as Walker gave their names: O'Grady, Hanlon, Olson, Jones, Webster, McGinty. They were Jim Parrish's sort, men who did honest work with their hands. And they were reasonable enough, it seemed to Jim. O'Grady was the spokesman.

"We want the mine made safe, Mr. Carlin," he stated. "We're having too many accidents. Too many men are getting hurt—and killed. We figure too that the company should build and equip a hospital, so that hurt miners get the right care. Then there are the families of the men who were killed in that explosion and fire a month ago. We miners are helping them, but it's a burden on us. The company should set up a Widow and Orphan Fund, like a mining company up in Butte did. We know all that'll cost a lot of money, but—"

Lyle Jarrett looked as though he would strangle. His face was red and his eyes popped. "A lot of money!" he bellowed. "It'd cost a fortune! You men might as well ask Mr. Carlin to turn the company over to you!"

JIM knew that he was supposed to refuse these requests, but they seemed reasonable to him. He was thinking that a man who could afford a hotel like this one, a private coach, and thousands of dollars' worth of fine clothes, besides all the things Jim didn't know about, could easily afford to do something for the men who made his wealth possible. He suddenly knew that he wouldn't do as Jarrett wanted. In Phil Carlin's name, as a copper king, he was going to grant their demands.

He said, "It sounds sensible, men. You're going to have all you asked for. You have Phil Carlin's word for it."

The miners yelped with pleasure, as though they hadn't expected so much. They crowded around Jim, slapped him upon the back and shook his hand. Hank Walker looked surprised, but pleased. Rita Shannon was beaming. Jim said, "Now we'll go downstairs and have a round of drinks." He saw that Lyle Jarrett was actually choking. The lawyer was gasping, "Blake! Blake; where are you?"

He was too excited to remember that Blake was out searching for the real Phil Carlin.

Those miners were big drinkers and great talkers, so the morning and part of the afternoon was gone before Jim Parrish got away from the bar and back

upstairs. Rita was alone. She told Jim that Blake had returned, again without having found Phil Carlin. Blake and Jarrett had had a long talk. Rita hadn't heard much of it, for Jarrett had sent her to her bedroom. "But I listened at the door," she told Jim.

She stated that Jarrett had been crazy-mad over the promises Jim had made to the miners. "He ranted and yelled," she said, "and told Blake they had to get rid of you. And that nasty little Blake said something about making a deal with the Maughers."

Jim frowned. "A deal to have the Maughers get rid of me, eh?"

"I guess so, Jim," Rita said.

"Jarrett's only Consolidated's lawyer. He's got no right to make a deal with the Maughers."

"He has Phil's power of attorney."

"What's that?"

"A paper he got Phil to sign the night before we arrived here," Rita said. "After he hired you." Her eyes grew round, startled. She seemed to have thought of something that alarmed her. "It gives Jarrett the right to handle all Phil's business and financial affairs—even in Phil's absence. Jim, do you suppose—?"

Jim got the idea, then. Using the excuse that Phil Carlin was always too drunk to deal with the Copperville people, Jarrett had hired Jim to take Phil's place. Then he'd talked Phil into signing that power of attorney paper—because he had some other scheme for wanting Phil out of the picture. He'd hired Jim thinking he was a tramp who would do anything for a little money. Jim said, "If I'd played Jarrett's game, he'd have used that paper for some scheme of his own. But then he found out he couldn't handle me, so he wanted to get rid of me."

"And get Phil back."

"Phil must have caught on," Jim continued, thinking it out. "That's why he's hiding out. He came here last night to see you and me, Rita—but he keeps away from Jarrett and Blake. That means he's afraid of them."

The girl nodded.

Jim said, "Once Jarrett showed me to the town as Phil Carlin, he sent Blake back to the private coach—for some reason. But Phil was already gone. That upset Blake and Jarrett. It knocked the props from under their scheme, whatever it is. Phil hadn't been as drunk or as dumb as that pair figured—and I wasn't so easily handled. When Jarrett found that the Maughers were on the prod, he tried to scare me off and get Phil back—so the Maughers would take care of Phil, when they didn't get what they wanted!"

"That's it, Jim! Jarrett wanted Phil killed!"

"It looks that way," Jim admitted. "But why? What'll it get Jarrett?"

"Control of Consolidated, maybe."

"Maybe."

"What will we do?" Rita asked.

"We could go to the law, but nobody'd believe such a crazy story," Jim told her. "All we can do is try to locate Phil before the Maughers pull something."

Locating Phil Carlin wasn't, as Jim had discovered before, any easy matter. After making the rounds of the saloons, Jim went out to the copper mine and talked to the men working at the shaft-house. They shook their heads; they hadn't seen a young fellow with a yellow mustache and wearing cowhand's clothes. Jim tried the noisy, smoking smelter with no better luck. He returned to town, tried the saloons again. Some of the bartenders recalled such a man as Jim described, but each said, "Haven't seen him today."

They would have remembered, too, for the saloon business was slack by day, with Copperville's male population at work at the smelter and in the mine. Finally, Jim went to the little frame building housing the town marshal's office. He asked the leathery-faced Burke about the man he hunted, but was careful not to give his name.

"I saw him around last night," Burke said, thoughtfully. "Talked to him. I used to be a cowpuncher, when I was young, and I figured this hombre was one. Dressed like one. But he sure didn't talk like a cowhand."

"Where'd you see him, Marshal?"

"In Ace Mardel's place."

"I've been there twice today. He's not there."

"Well, I'll keep an eye open for him, Mr. Carlin," Burke said.

From the marshal's office, Jim walked to the railroad siding where the private coach stood. He entered but the coach was empty. Jim found some cigarettes on the table that was littered with Phil's liquor bottles. He lighted one, sat down, tried to figure out where Phil Carlin could be holed up. He'd spent the afternoon hunting, and he sat in the coach so long that the sun was down before he realized it. He got up and went out and as he walked back to the street, an engine and tender backed onto the siding and bumped the coach. Jim looked around and saw a trainman couple the coach onto the tender.

He went on to the hotel, recalling that the Maughers had been due in town at sundown to get his answer to their demand for a share in Consolidated. If they'd come, they'd already gone. At least, Jim didn't see the three or their horses outside the New Copperville House. He turned in, crossed the lobby, climbed the staircase. He went along the carpeted third floor hallway, opened the parlor door, stepped inside.

The room was dark, but Jim sensed that someone was there.

"Rita—?"

The girl screamed, "Jim! The Maughers!"

Shadowy figures loomed. A gun slammed down on Jim's head. The force of the blow drove him to his knees. He got hold of his gun, pulled it out. But Lyle Jarrett yelled, "Hit him again!" And somebody hit him again. Jim lost his hold on the gun. He sprawled down on his face.

CHAPTER V

The Party in the Private Coach

A MATCH flared, a lamp glowed. Jim's brain was reeling. A boot prodded his ribs. Old Purd Maugher chuckled, said, "He's tough, all right. That didn't put him out." He had a dry, mirthless chuckle. "Get up, mister. We're going places."

Jim got up, slowly. He stood swaying. His head throbbed with pain. Old Purd's dark-skinned son was the one who'd hit him. He was grinning, his gun still in his hand. Jim saw his own six-gun had slid across the floor and come to rest beneath the sofa. It was as good as miles beyond his reach. Fat Lyle Jarrett stood there, still looking uneasy though not so worried as that morning. At the far side of the room, Willis Blake was holding Rita Shannon; but not too securely, for the girl was almost too much for him to handle. She was pale with fright.

Jarrett said flatly, "You forced me to this, Parrish. You're a stubborn son. I would have cut you in on the deal, if you'd been sensible. Now I've got to get rid of you and deal with the Maughers."

"What's your game, anyway?" Jim demanded. He really didn't care, now; the question was all he could think to say. "What're you after?"

"I'm after Consolidated Copper, Parrish."

"A steal, eh, Jarrett?"

"A change of ownership," the fat man said, mockingly. "It's been Carlin property too long."

"What happens to Phil?"

"He'll go on an extended trip, Parrish. Say, to Europe."

"And you'll use his power of attorney to loot Consolidated," Jim said. "You're sure a blackleg, Jarrett. But you'll have to find Phil before you send him on a trip. As long as he's alive and out of your hands, you'll never get away with this."

Purd Maugher broke in, "We'll find that hombre. Right now, we've got you to get rid of. Here's what we're going to do, friend. We're all leaving the hotel and going to the railroad. If anybody on the street gets curious, we'll tell them that Phil Carlin and us Maughers have come to friendly terms. Should you say different, or yell for help, we'll fill you full of lead. Savvy, Parrish?"

Jim nodded gloomily. "What happens at the railroad?"

Jarrett broke in. "The private coach is hooked to an engine, Parrish, and ready to leave for Butte. You and Rita are going out on it."

"Alive, Jarrett?"

"Why, now, how else?" said the fat man. And grinned blandly.

Disarmed and groggy, Jim could only obey. He and Jarrett were first to leave

the room, but the three Maughers followed close behind. Blake had some difficulty bringing the girl; she managed to trip the little man, and shove him tumbling into the hall. She darted back into the parlor, slamming the door. One of the Maughers went back to help Blake with her, and then Rita came without struggling.

But they went downstairs, through the busy lobby, and into the street without arousing suspicion. They looked like a friendly party; if people stared, it was only with surprise and curiosity. They too hacks. Jim, Jarrett, Old Purd rode in the first; Blake, Rita, the two younger Maughers in the other. They were driven to the railroad, past the station, over to the siding where the engine and private coach were waiting.

Jarrett paid off the hack drivers, said, "All right, friends—" he was talking for the benefit of the train crew over by the locomotive—"we'll all go aboard. Blake, you go first and light the lamps."

Blake went first, got the coach lighted. Jarrett motioned for Jim to mount the steps. Rita started forward at the same time, collided with Jim, pressed something—a gun—into his hand. He went on up the steps, thrusting the gun under his coat. It was his own weapon. Rita had had it hidden in the folds of her skirt. She must have got it after shoving Blake off balance in the hotel hallway, when she'd ducked back into the parlor. "Good girl," Jim thought. But the gun didn't give him much hope. The Maughers were three to his one.

He stepped into the coach, Rita right behind him, and the Maughers coming after them. The three hardcases grunted to each other on seeing such a luxurious car, and Old Purd, giving one of his dry chuckles, said, "Now you boys see why I want a share of Consolidated?"

Jarrett came in a minute later, having paused to give orders to the train crew. The engine's bell started clanging. There was a hissing of steam. For no reason at all, Jarrett glanced at his watch. The train started out with a series of jerks. The Maughers prowled about, examining everything. Old Purd pointed to the door connecting with the other compartment.

"What's in there, Jarrett?"

"Sleeping rooms."

"I'll be danged. Sure is fancy, this set up," Purd said, chuckling.

HE SANK into an armchair, and his sons stood behind it. Rita moved into a corner, shrank into it. Jarrett lighted a cigar. Blake sat at the desk, and shivered with frayed nerves. Jim turned to the windows, so his back was to the others. The train was gathering speed. Copperville had already fallen behind. The miles fell away. Nobody spoke. The quiet inside the coach made Jim's nerves knot up. He kept his back turned.

Old Purd said, finally, "Well, Jarrett, when do you want it to be?"

Jarrett said, "Suit yourself, Purd. Blake and I will step into the back compartment."

Not turning, Jim said, "I wouldn't leave, if I were you, Jarrett." He unbuttoned his coat, gripped the butt of the six-gun in his waistband. "The truth is, you're not leaving," he added. He jerked out the gun, and swung around.

Jarrett's mouth fell agape, his eyes bulged. He dropped his cigar and backed away. Jim couldn't bring himself to kill Jarrett, no matter what the man was, in cold blood. So he kept on swinging around, toward the Maughers. He'd caught them off guard. Old Purd reared out of his chair, pulling at his gun. He got in the way of his two sons, who were quicker on the draw. Purd fired one wild shot. He didn't get his gun leveled in his panicky haste. Then Jim's weapon was blasting.

Old Purd doubled over, coughing and choking, but his slowness in falling still ruined his sons' shots. They fired over him, wildly, and the dark-skinned one yelped as Jim creased his arm. Suddenly, as old Purd hit the floor, the other two Maughers turned their guns away from Jim Parrish. For the door to the other part of the coach had swung open, and a voice barked, "That'll be all, gents!"

It was Burke, Copperville's marshal, with gun in hand. Crowding after him was Phil Carlin, he too gripping a gun. For an instant, the Maughers hesitated. Then they dropped their weapons and sullenly lifted their hands. Rita,

crowded in a corner, cried, "Jim, watch it!"

Jim swung around and saw Lyle Jarrett, backed to the platform door, draw a pocket gun. The fat man's gun roared twice, and one slug ripped along Jim's left side. It was like the touch of a red-hot branding iron. But it didn't stop Jim Parrish. He lunged forward, firing. He hit Jarrett with his first shot, but the lawyer got the door open and backed out still shooting. Jim fired again and missed.

He leapt for the door, pushed out onto the platform. He saw Jarrett leap from the coach, off into the darkness. A scream rang out behind the falling man, for he kept on falling—down over the side of the bridge across which the train was racing, down into a deep and rocky gorge. Jim lost sight of him, but he knew that Lyle Jarrett hadn't escaped.

Old Purd Maugher was dead. Russ and Bart Maugher were cowed prisoners. Willis Blake was nervously trying to claim he had no part in the game. Jim Parrish's wound was nothing more than torn flesh, and Rita, her hands very gentle, bandaged him with strips torn from one of her petticoats. Burke went forward, climbed onto the tender, told the engine crew to take the coach back to Copperville.

Phil Carlin did the explaining. He stood tall in Jim Parrish's range clothes; in fact, he seemed to have gained in stature. Too, he'd lost some of his cultured way of talking. He bragged a little, like a cowhand who had pulled something he was proud of. "Lucky for you, Jim, that we showed up," he said.

Jim nodded. "How come you did?"

"Well, the marshal was hunting for me. Because you'd asked him to," Carlin said. "I'd been spending my time in a cheap hotel, coming out only after dark. Burke found me tonight, and he was taking me to you when you and the others came from the New Copperville House and got into those hacks. It looked queer to me, and to Burke. So we followed. We jumped onto the back of the coach just as the train pulled out. We came into the rear compartment, and listened at the door."

"How come you hid out, in the first place?" Jim asked.

"I figured Jarrett was pulling something crooked," Carlin said. "He'd got me to sign a power of attorney when I was half drunk. I got to worrying about that paper. With it in his possession, and you taking my place, Jarrett could have robbed me of everything I own, providing he got me out of the way. I figured he meant to murder me. So I got into your clothes, thinking they'd disguise me . . . . Just as I left the coach, Blake came back. He came back with a gun."

He paused, scowled at the nervous little man. "Jarrett sent you to murder me," he accused. "I watched from outside the coach. You prowled around in here, with your gun, hunting me."

Blake said thinly, "Phil, I swear it—you're wrong!"

Carlin turned from him in disgust. "From what I've seen and heard, Jim," he went on, "you and Rita have been siding me. I'm grateful. From now on, I'm going to be the real boss of Consolidated. And I'm going to help make good the promises you made to the miners. But I'll need a man to help me, one I can trust. I'm offering you a job, friend—— a big job with Consolidated."

Jim didn't say anything. He was overwhelmed by surprise.

"It'll give you a chance to pay back Milt Shard," Carlin said, apparently thinking that Jim didn't like the idea. "Besides, you'll need a big-paying job to keep a wife like Rita."

"That's not true!" Rita said, almost fiercely. "If Jim wants to go back to being a cowhand, I'll go with him." She flushed, bit her lower lip. "If he wants me," she added, in a shallow tone.

Jim looked from one to the other. He wanted Rita Shannon, and he would like a job with Phil Carlin—for he liked the man. But he figured that Phil had first claim on the girl. . . .Phil Carlin must have read his mind, for he said, "I'm no more in love with Rita than she is with me, Jim."

Jim could see that he was speaking the truth, so he grinned and said, "All right; I'll take the job. I've got to pay back Milt Shard. And I couldn't keep a wife on a cowhand's wages." He grinned again. "Besides, I kind of like living in copper king style!"

Johnny and Greenriver drove lead at the riders while the hogs milled around the street

An Exciting Novelet

STEP-SONS

CHAPTER I

Rawhide Death

JOHNNY BUCK and old Greenriver Ives had pulled up beside the trail and sat staring fixedly off to the north. The Arizona sun was hot; there was no wind; and Johnny and Greenriver were thirsty and tired.

"A buzzard," Johnny Buck said, "is a powerful pretty and graceful critter when sailin' high in the blue yonder. But, seen up close, it's black and ugly as sin."

"I swear so," Greenriver agreed.

"Low-flyin' buzzards," Johnny went on, "always mean trouble."

"So do women, likker and poker. But there's a difference!"

"Maybe we better go see."

"Now wait, younker!" Greenriver

To Johnny Buck, Cruelty and Injustice Are a

# of DISASTER

By GUNNISON STEELE

growled, licking his leathery lips. "I got nothin' ag'in buzzards, so why should I want to beat 'em out of a meal? Likely it's just a cow critter which got sunstroke from this danged heat and died them scavengers are after. Besides, we was headed for Wolfhead, remember? They likely got shade there—and grub, and likker, maybe even water."

"And maybe what those buzzards are after's got just two legs—"

"So what? Buzzards don't pester live folks, and if they're dead we couldn't help 'em. Couldn't do nothin' but get ourselves into another mess of trouble. Johnny, I'm gettin' old. All I crave is peace and quiet."

"Yeah," Johnny Buck grinned. "Just so it's garnished with plenty brimstone and perdition and seasoned with gunsmoke. And I still think we better go see."

Call to Action—Despite Any and All Risk!

Abruptly Johnny reined his big buckskin through a screening of mesquite and manzanita beside the trail. Grumbling disgustedly, Greenriver followed. Keeping their eyes riveted on the half a dozen buzzards that were circling low over a spot possibly half a mile to the north, they went slowly forward.

Johnny Buck, originally from Texas, was a lanky, freckled young hombre with hair the color of the setting sun. He wore a bone-handled old .44, thonged low. Johnny Buck wasn't handsome, but he was good-natured, and tough, and quick-tempered. His dislike of seeing anything imposed on kept him in hot water much of the time.

Greenriver Ives was a pot-bellied little oldster with cherubic features, birdlike eyes, and an up-curling gray mustache that sometimes tickled his ears. Greenriver, who as an army scout had helped General Crook tame Cochise and his warriors, swore he could scent trouble a mile away, but usually approached closer to get a better smell.

They were almost underneath the circling vultures now, and could see their greedy eyes as they craned their scrawny necks to peer downward, could hear the rustle of their wings. Several others had already dropped, and were perched like ghouls in solemn conclave on the limb of a dead tree fifty yards ahead.

As Johnny and Greenriver appeared, the buzzards on the limb started hopping about and croaking their harsh protests. Their stench permeated the hot air.

"A cow critter, huh?" Johnny blurted suddenly. "Look!"

Directly ahead of them was an almost dry waterhole, with two or three scrawny cows nosing about in it. Back fifty feet from the waterhole was a small pine tree; and tied to the tree was a man.

"Looks dead," Greenriver grunted.

JOHNNY spurred up close and jumped to the ground, followed by Greenriver. Unmistakably, the man tied to the tree was dead. His legs were limp, his head sagged forward on his chest. He was a heavy, middle-aged man wearing patched range garb. His saddled horse grazed nearby.

But it was the manner of his dying that turned Johnny Buck's eyes to blue ice, and made old Greenriver swear and chew savagely on his cud of tobacco.

For looped about the dead man's neck, its ends tied behind the sapling, was a strip of rawhide. They knew instantly what had happened.

Before being looped about the man's throat the rawhide thong had been soaked in water, and tied just tight enough so as not to strangle him. As the sun dried the rawhide, it had slowly contracted, slowly choked the victim to death.

Johnny Buck seldom swore, but now he did, applying a few choice names to the ones who had done this, a slow, wicked anger gathering inside him.

"I swear so," Greenriver agreed, and added a few names of his own. "How yuh figure it, younker?"

"I don't," Johnny said bleakly. "Not yet. It wasn't men that done this, but buzzards—human buzzards!"

"Yeah, buzzards," Greenriver said.

He spat, whirled, and his long-barreled old Peacemaker leaped into his hand. The five blasts from the gun sounded almost like one thunderous explosion. With a sort of ghastly rhythm, the five buzzards that had been dancing and croaking on the tree limb tumbled to the ground where they lay kicking and flapping.

"Never did like buzzards," Greenriver grumbled.

Johnny cut the rawhide thong. He cut the ropes that bound the man to the tree and eased him to the ground. He looked through the pockets for some means of identification, but found none.

Greenriver lay on his stomach and drank from the muddy water hole. He rose, spitting and making a wry face.

"Waugh! Reckon the stuff's all right for what it was meant for, which is bathin' purposes. Where yuh goin' kid?"

"To catch up this gent's bronc."

"Why? He's dead, and can't come to no more harm. I gonies, younker, you seem bound to seek more trouble! Remember, we're a couple of pore, innercent wayfarers on a strange range. If we go luggin' a dead man into town somebody's gonna ask a lot of fool ques-

tions. They might even toss us into the juzgado."

Johnny glanced up at the circling buzzards.

"We can't leave him here."

"We can't go back to Smoketree Basin either," Greenriver growled wrathfully. "For why? Because you insisted on stickin' our noses into some other folks' business."

He caught the saddled horse and led it back to the water hole. They had just finished tying the dead man to the saddle, when there was a sudden clatter of hoofs and two riders came from a thin belt of timber and rode toward them. Johnny and Greenriver watched, hands on gun-butts.

The riders came up to within fifty feet of them, and stopped. Their hands fell away from their guns, and they stared slack-jawed at the newcomers.

One of the riders was a girl, slender, tanned, yellow-haired, dressed in levis and shirt and man's hat. The other rider was a freckled, tow-headed boy of maybe twelve. Apparently neither of them had a gun.

The two stared from Johnny and Greenriver to the still figure on the horse, consternation on their pale faces.

"That's him!" the boy shrilled suddenly. "The slimy sidewinders done killed him!"

THE girl started to swing to the ground, but thought better of it, and turned her blazing, accusing eyes full on Johnny Buck.

"Why did you kill him?" she demanded.

"We didn't," Johnny denied curtly. "We saw the buzzards, then found him tied to that tree."

"Hogwash!" yelled the boy. "If I had a gun I'd blast you low-down lyin' so-and-so's all to—"

The girl said sharply, "Jefferson, stop that swearing!" She looked back at Johnny. "If you didn't kill him, then who did?"

She was, Johnny decided, pretty as a spotted calf in a clover patch. Her nose turned up just a little—but Johnny liked that.

Swallowing hard, he said, "We don't know. Do we, Greenriver?"

"I swear not," Greenriver denied. "This gent, now, is he maybe yore daddy?"

"No. His name's Sam Lukas and he owns the Bar 4 over there a piece. He's just a neighbor of ours. I'm Bobbie Collins, and this is my brother Jeff. Sam Lukas had been gone from home since yesterday. Mrs. Lukas isn't well, so when Jeff and me rode by the ranch she asked us to look for her husband. She said he'd ridden over this way to mend a fence and hadn't come back. I was afraid. . . you say he was tied to that tree?

"Yeah."

"Do you two ride for some outfit near here?"

"Just pilgrims ridin' through. This Sam Lukas, you got any idea why anybody'd want to kill him?"

"We sure have," the boy said promptly. "He shotgunned a man two days ago, blowed him clean from his saddle. The slimy snake needed killin'. He was tryin' to make Sam Lukas—"

"Jefferson!" The girl's voice was like a slap. "We don't know anything about these gentlemen. For all we know they may have—"

"We didn't do it!" Johnny Buck said flatly. "I told yuh that. He's been dead several hours, likely ever since yesterday. We were fixin' to take him in to Wolfhead. Would we do that if we'd killed him?"

"N-no, I don't suppose so."

"Aw, Bob, we know who done it—or had it done," Jeff declared scornfully.

"We don't know anything," Bobbie Collins said sharply. "Except that this will be an awful shock to Mrs. Lukas."

Johnny asked gently, "You want we should take this Sam Lukas to his ranch, or to town?"

The girl frowned, biting her soft red lip.

"To town," she decided. "I'll tell Mrs. Lukas, and she can decide what to do."

She studied them frowningly for a moment, then abruptly wheeled her horse. Followed by Jeff, his bare heels beating a frantic tatto against his pony's ribs, they vanished into the belt of timber.

"That does it," Greenriver said dolefully.

"Does what?" Johnny asked blankly.

"Maybe builds a noose for our necks. Remember what happened when that redhead smiled at you over on Ute River? We wound up in jail, and if I hadn't had that extra smokepole cached in my boot—"

"But you did," Johnny Buck grinned. "Let's head out!"

CHAPTER II

Wolfhead

WOLFHEAD wasn't much of a town, just twin rows of unpainted frame buildings facing each other dismally across a dusty, rutted street. It seemed to have surrendered wholly to the heat.

A few figures appeared in doorways to stare curiously at Johnny Buck and Greenriver Ives as they rode slowly along the street, leading behind them the horse that bore the dead body of Sam Lukas. A few horses stood at tieracks, but no watering troughs or barrels were in sight.

Greenriver cleared his dry throat raspingly, his bald head bobbing toward a sign on their left: GOLD EAGLE SALOON, Ben Flowers, Prop. The mustached oldster licked his lips, mute entreaty in his eyes as he looked from the sign to Johnny.

"Business first," Johnny Buck decreed. "Ought to be some kind of law in this town."

As they progressed along the street, they saw Ben Flowers' name on a store front, a livery, and a blacksmith shop. An arrow-shaped sign, nailed to a hitch post and pointing toward the lower end of the street, said simply: WATER, Ben Flowers, owner.

"Varmint named Flowers seems to be the boss-wolf hereabouts," Greenriver growled. "Now, who'd like water well enough to pay for it?"

Johnny reined in suddenly to a tiebar. Beyond it a sign nailed over a doorway said: Duke Ring, Marshal. Standing in the doorway, watching Johnny and Greenriver, was a man whose enormous bulk almost entirely filled it.

As Johnny and Greenriver swung down, the fat man stepped to the ground and waddled forward, swiping at his flabby face with a soaked bandanna. He had a beaklike nose and muddy, furtive little eyes. Neither Johnny nor Greenriver liked his looks.

"Yuh got a sheriff in this town?" Johnny asked.

"County seat's thirty mile away," wheezed the fat man. "My name's Duke Ring, and I'm the law here. What you got there?"

"Dead man."

"Who is he, and how come him dead?"

"He died because he stopped breathing, which happened when someone tied a strip of wet rawhide about his throat and let it dry there!"

The marshal looked sharply at Johnny, waddled over and peered at the dead man.

"Sam Lukas," he muttered. "He killed Lute Jarboe two days ago. He should of knowed better." The marshal turned back to Johnny and Greenriver. "How yuh say it happened?"

Briefly and truthfully, Johnny explained how they had found Sam Lukas at the waterhole. To their immense surprise and relief, the fat lawman seemed not to doubt their story at all.

"Too bad," he said sadly. "Sam took to broodin' over that killin', I reckon, and decided to end it all. As plain a case of suicide as I ever saw."

"Maybe you misunderstood," Johnny Buck said slowly. "Sam Lukas was tied to the tree, and that strip of rawhide had been knotted behind the tree. He couldn't have reached that far even if his arms had been free."

Duke Ring looked at them with his muddy, furtive eyes.

"Strangers hereabouts, ain't you?"

"I swear so," Greenriver said hurriedly.

"Thought so. Suicide. You aim to tarry long in Wolfhead?"

"Didn't figger to." Greenriver could see the anger boiling up in Johnny's blue eyes, and he rushed on. "Just long enough to cut the dust from our gizzards, in fact. 'Course our broncs'll need water. Know where such can be found?"

"Plenty water at the lower end of the street among them cliffs. All there is in

town. Not much out on the range, either. Drought. Too bad Sam Lukas killed hisself, ain't it?"

"I swear so," Greenriver agreed, and jostled Johnny toward his horse. He hissed, "Cuss-dang it, younker, don't be a lunkhead! This ain't no put-in of ours."

THAT was gospel, Johnny Buck knew. A little sullenly, he mounted the buckskin, and he and Greenriver rode on along the street. The lower end of the street jammed up against a nest of reddish cliffs.

Water, clear and cold, trickled from a cleft in one of the walls twenty feet above the sand. At its source it was caught in a hollowed-out log and piped to within five feet of the ground where it was caught in barrels. The waste water fell to the earth and flowed in a shallow trench to a waterhole a hundred feet away.

Greenriver grunted, pointed. A four-strand barbwire fence encircled the waterhole.

A burly, hawk-faced man with chalk-colored eyes stood near the barrels, a rifle in one hand. He watched sullenly as Johnny and Greenriver dismounted.

Johnny nodded curtly, said, "Howdy, Mister. Me and my pard are dry as two lizards fightin' in a powder keg. How about a drink for us, and one for our broncs from that pool yonder?"

"That's what it's for," Chalk-Eye grunted.

Johnny Buck stepped forward and reached for a tin cup that dangled by a chain from the log pipe.

"Just a minute, saddle-bum! Can't yuh read?"

Chalk-Eye gestured with his rifle muzzle toward a sign, nailed to one of the barrels, that they hadn't noticed before: Humans, fifty-cents per drink—Broncs, one dollar.

Johnny lowered his hand, his freckled features hard and cold.

"Water wasn't never meant to be sold," he said. "It's a gift from the big Boss up yonder."

"Yeah? Ben Flowers wouldn't say so. No pay, no water. In advance."

"Never did like buzzards," Greenriver growled, reaching for his gun.

Johnny nudged him sharply. "No trouble, remember?"

"Tough, huh?" Chalk-Eye sneered. "It won't get yuh nowhere. Ben Flowers filed on this water before there was any town here. I just work for him. You want water, or not?"

"How much for us and our broncs, friend?" Johnny purred.

"Three dollars. And pay up, or high-tail. Yonder comes some more customers!"

A heavily-loaded wagon was creaking along the street. On the spring seat were a man and a woman. The team looked scrawny and tired.

Johnny Buck took three silver dollars from his pocket and gave them to Chalk-Eye, while Greenriver watched disgustedly.

"Go ahead and drink. But don't try to take away any extra."

Johnny and Greenriver drank deeply, savoring each drop of the cold, sweet water. Then they opened the gap in the barbwire and led their horses to the nearby pool. The animals thrust their noses eagerly into the water.

"Peace is wonderful, ain't it?" Johnny grinned, gazing obliquely at his pardner.

"I swear so," Greenriver grunted, and made no effort to lower his voice so that Chalk-Eye couldn't hear the names he was being called.

But Chalk-Eye was paying no attention to them. The wagon had drawn to a halt and the mules stood with drooping heads. The driver, a thin, stoop-shouldered man of middle age, had climbed down and stood talking to Chalk-Eye. In his hand the stooped man held a blacksnake whip with which he was gesturing excitedly.

His angry voice came plainly to Johnny and Greenriver: "I got to have water, I tell you! We're plumb out. I'll send the money back when I get settled."

"No pay, no water," Chalk-Eye said flatly.

"But we've got no money," pleaded the slender, dark-eyed woman in the wagon. "We've had a lot of hard luck, and now we're having to leave our place and go up to Elkhorn where we have relatives. All we own is in this wagon. Without water, for ourselves and the mules, we'd never make it to Elkhorn."

"Too bad," Chalk-Eye sneered.

The thin man begged, "Just a drink for my wife, then—"

"Not a cussed drop, I say, unless yuh pay! And seein' you ain't got no money, get your ratty outfit away from here while yuh got the chance!"

Goaded to desperation, the stoop-shouldered man swore shrilly and raised the whip threateningly.

The woman spoke softly, "Please, Dave, don't cause any trouble."

BUT the man, shouting angrily, slashed the whip across the sneering Chalk-Eye's shoulders. Chalk-Eye bawled an enraged curse. He grabbed the lash and jerked savagely. The powerful tug jerked the whip from the stooped man's hand and sent him sprawling to the ground.

"I'll show you!" Chalk-Eye snarled, shifting ends with the whip. "I'll cut yuh to pieces with yore own whip!"

The long lash uncoiled, hissing viciously as it cut at the fallen man's back. The man groaned, rolled over, arms upflung to protect his face. The whip flicked and stabbed again, ripping like a knife blade at the helpless man's clothes.

The woman screamed. She jumped to the ground and ran at Chalk-Eye, clawing and beating at his brutal face with her nails and fists.

Mouthing oaths, Chalk-Eye slapped her, the blow hurling her ten feet and to the sand. She huddled there, sobbing, bewildered.

Chalk-Eye whirled back to the woman's husband, who had struggled to his knees. The lash flicked back, started to uncurl.

But suddenly Chalk-Eye staggered as if a pole-ax had hit him between the eyes. The whip was snatched from his hand. He heard its hissing snarl, felt its wicked bite into his chest. Bellowing with pain and rage, Chalk-Eye drove in at his tormenter, huge fists mauling.

Johnny Buck tossed the whip aside. He side-stepped, hammered a bony fist into Chalk-Eye's face. Chalk-Eye whirled completely about and sat down abruptly. He looked blankly up at red-haired Johnny Buck. Then he came up, bawling like a mad bull, and drove at Johnny again.

Johnny Buck knew all the tricks. He met Chalk-Eye head on. He jabbed a fist into Chalk-Eye's stomach and slammed an elbow savagely up under Chalk-Eye's chin.

The breath went out of the burly man. He reeled back, his mouth gaping wide, his face a greenish color. Without giving him time to get set, Johnny went after him. Deliberately, without mercy, he chopped his fists into Chalk-Eye's brutal face.

A dozen men had come running from the shacks to watch the fight. Now a couple of them, roughly-dressed, hard-faced hombres, started to rush into the battle.

Old Greenriver, who had been standing calmly by, spat, "Go ahead, gents, if you want yore stummicks lined with lead!"

The two hard-cases stopped. They looked at the paunchy, mustached oldster, at the long-barreled gun in his hand, and backed away.

Chalk-Eye was on the ground, all the fight gone out of him. He glared up at Johnny Buck, hate and fear twisting his battered features.

"You can't get by with this," he whined. "I—I'll kill you! Just wait till Ben Flowers hears about it—"

"Shut up—and stay shut!" Johnny ordered coldly, and Chalk-Eye wilted. But the hate and rage didn't leave his eyes.

Both the man and the woman were on their feet now. They still were a little dazed by what had happened. The woman grabbed hold of Johnny's hand and tried to thank him, but Johnny Buck hastily jerked his hand away.

"I been thanked," he said. He took several more silver dollars from his pocket and tossed them to the ground beside Chalk-Eye. "Drink up, you two, and water yore mules. Then fill up yore water barrel. That ought to take you to where yuh're goin'."

He and Greenriver watched as the man and his wife drank. The two hard-cases who had tried to mix in the fight drew aside and talked in whispers. The other spectators started drifting back to the shacks.

After watering the mules, the thin man, who said his name was Dave Raw-

son, hooked them to the wagon again. He and his dark-eyed wife climbed back to the spring seat. Chalk-Eye had got up; he watched gloweringly, but made no effort to interfere.

"We'll repay you, sometime, somehow," the woman said to Johnny Buck. "We won't forget."

JOHNNY BUCK grinned, shook his red head. Dave Rawson lifted the lines, spoke to the mules, and the wagon creaked into motion. It moved along the street, and out of Wolfhead, into whatever future awaited Dave Rawson and his courageous wife.

"High and mighty, ain't yuh?" Chalk-Eye sneered. "Well, you can't stay alive and in Wolfhead both—"

"Didn't I say shut up?" Johnny snapped, and started toward the water-seller.

Chalk-Eye backed away, slipped in the mud and fell, clawed to his feet and kept on backing.

"Waugh!" Greenriver grunted disgustedly. "Buzzards'll at least fight when yuh try to take their carrion away from 'em. Let's go get somethin' to take this water taste from our gullets."

They led their horses back along the street to the livery stable. After seeing that the horses were grained, they went on along the plank walk and entered a saloon. The place was empty except for the bartender, a bald, fat little man named Slim.

Johnny and Greenriver had their drink, then a second one. It was raw, potent stuff, served in a tin cup from a demijohn.

"Heck's hogpen!" Greenriver shuddered, blinking pale eyes. "She hit bottom and bounced four times. Hombre, I bet yuh got some sidewinders denned up in that jug!"

"You said you wanted a drink," Slim grinned. "If you wanted water why didn't yuh say so?"

"Water?" Greenriver looked startled. "You meanin' that as an insult? Anyway, we're tired as well as thirsty. Give us the jug and we'll go over there to that table and rest."

Slim shoved out the demijohn, Greenriver took it and they crossed to where there was a poker table and chairs. They sat down, Greenriver with his back braced against the wall and his spurred boots on the poker table. The oldster hoisted the jug again, sighed contentedly, settled back comfortably and a moment later was snoring raucously.

Johnny Buck leaned back and stared moodily at the flyspecked ceiling, thinking about what had happened this day. First, there was the dead man, the murdered man. There was the fat town marshal, Duke Ring, who blandly insisted that the murdered man had committed suicide. Duke Ring was either scared or a crook. There was the mysterious Ben Flowers, who owned considerable property and sold water to folks who were dying for a drink.

Finally, Johnny thought with a little thrill, there were the slender, yellow-haired girl named Bobbie Collins, and her towheaded brother Jeff. In the eyes of both there had been fear and distrust.

Something, Johnny Buck decided, needed fixing badly on this range.

Abruptly the lanky redhead's thoughts snapped back to the present. Slim, the barkeep, was staring toward the swing doors, and now Johnny's gaze focused there, too.

What looked like the twin muzzles of a double-barreled shotgun were sliding between the batwings. The wicked-looking thing shifted, weaved, like the head of a rattlesnake, and then came to bear directly on the two seated there at the poker table.

CHAPTER III

Gunsmoke Collectors

JOHNNY yelled, "Greenriver!" and simultaneously grabbed for his gun and slammed himself in a headlong dive for the sleeping old-timer's chair. His bullet knocked splinters from one of the batwings inches from the head of the man behind the shotgun. There was a startled, strangled yell from the man outside, and then the shotgun exploded with a thunderous roar that shook the buildings, spewing twin funnels of

death and destruction directly over the spot where Johnny and Greenriver had been a moment before.

Johnny's slashing dive had spilled Greenriver violently to the floor. Greenriver squalled like a fire-singed panther, rolled, and came up with his long-barreled old Peacemaker in his fist.

"Murderin' Apaches!" he bellowed. "Cochise and his sculpin' varmints has done busted loose again!"

Johnny was already up and running toward the doorway. Greenriver followed. They peered cautiously between the batwings before plunging recklessly out.

A man, clutching a smoking shotgun in one hand, was lumbering up the middle of the street.

"Ol' Chalk-Eye!" Greenriver muttered, and snapped a shot at the running man.

The bullet must have grazed some part of Chalk-Eye's anatomy, for he gave an agonized yell, jumped high in the air and dropped the shotgun, but kept on running.

Johnny and Greenriver crowded out onto the plank walk, and braked to a sudden halt. A bunch of perhaps a dozen gaunt razorback hogs were crossing the street. Beyond the hogs, half a dozen riders were clustered in the street. The riders were gun-belted, hard-faced, and they were staring puzzledly at the antics of Chalk-Eye.

Chalk-Eye bawled at them, "Gun them two down—they tried to murder me!"

The eyes of the riders turned to Johnny and Greenriver. They grabbed out their guns, put spurs to their horses and started a rush toward the saloon before which Johnny and Greenriver stood. A gun blasted, and a bullet snarled waspishly past Johnny's ear.

"Chalk-Eye has got friends," Johnny said.

"I swear so," Greenriver growled, and his old gun blasted.

But just then he hung a bootheel under a loose board and the bullet went wild. It hit one of the razor-back hogs, and the gaunt old boar started squealing and whirling like a pinwheel. This startled his mates, and they started squealing and running.

With bullets hissing about them, Johnny and Greenriver leaped back into the saloon. From between the batwings they drove lead at the charging riders. A horse went down, catapulting its rider headlong among the squealing, trampling hogs.

The man among the hogs started bellowing and cursing. This frightened the hogs worse than ever, and they stampeded among the horses. The horses started to rear and buck and squeal.

The street was filled with pitching, sunfishing horses, cursing men, blazing guns and squealing hogs.

"Wah-hoo!" Greenriver bawled jubilantly. "Never seed such a sight since the time the Sioux figgered to kidnap my mother-in-law!"

SUDDENLY a rider mounted on a huge, silver-bedecked horse came plunging along the street. The horse's shoulder hit Chalk-Eye, who had turned back to watch what he hoped would be the eradication of Johnny and Greenriver, and knocked him sprawling on his face into the dust.

The rider was a tall, powerful man with handsome features that were dark and arrogant. He was fancily dressed in dark velvet trousers, shiny boots and blue silk shirt. A cartridge belt was looped, bandolier fashion, over his left shoulder. Here, Johnny sensed instinctively, was Ben Flowers.

Flowers jerked his black stallion to a slithering halt. His stentorian voice could be heard over all the town.

"What in blazin' Hades is goin' on here?"

Gradually the tangle of men, horses and razor-back hogs straightened itself out. The riders gathered a little sheepishly about Ben Flowers. The outraged hogs took refuge under the buildings.

Chalk-Eye got up from the dust. He babbled out his story of how Johnny and Greenriver had humiliated him at the waterhole, of how, when he had decided to wipe out that humiliation with a double-barreled shotgun, he had again suffered ignominious defeat.

Ben Flowers threw back his head and laughter rolled forth from his deep chest. But there was no mirth in the laughter. It was more like the cruel

howl of a mountain wolf.

Abruptly the tall dark man stopped laughing. He had a quirt in his hand, and now with deliberate ferocity he suddenly slashed this quirt across Chalk-Eye's face. Chalk-Eye howled with pain and stumbled backward.

"Catch up and ride!" Flowers ordered flatly. "You're through. I need men for my jobs, not bungling half-wits!"

He wheeled the black and rode toward the saloon, arrogantly waving aside the other mounted men.

Greenriver spat, eared back his gun-hammer. "The boss wolf hisself. Yuh want him to die quick or kick a while?"

"Wait," Johnny counseled.

The dark man dismounted before the saloon. Hands empty, his huge silver spurs jingling, he strode inside. Smiling a little, he looked at Johnny and Greenriver, standing there with guns in hand and the will for violence in their hearts.

"I'm Ben Flowers," the tall man said. "And you can put up yore guns, boys. Anything I hate it's violence and bloodshed."

"I swear so," Greenriver agreed piously. "All we crave is peace and quiet."

"Now we understand each other." Flowers' shiny, icy-cold eyes belied his smile. "Those are my boys you been workin' over."

"It was forced onto us—"

"Yeah, I know. No hard feelings. But good men are hard to find. You boys lookin' for a job?"

"Depends," Johnny said. "Shake out some details."

Flowers said, "Not here. Let's go up to the Gold Eagle, where there's somethin' to drink besides hogwash."

Greenriver jiggled his gun-muzzle and his mustaches started twitching, a plain indication that he didn't like either Ben Flowers nor the idea of working for him. He gulped when Johnny Buck said:

"Why not? We could use a job."

They went out and along the street, and a moment later entered the larger and more ornate Gold Eagle Saloon. They went to the mahogany bar, Flowers ordered out his special bottle, and they drank.

"Waugh!" Greenriver smacked his lips. "She snuggled down gentle as a feather on snow."

"Now," Ben Flowers said. "I'm not asking you boys any questions. The way you stood this town on its head is recommendation enough for me. I hear you two found Sam Lukas dead."

"Fact," Johnny said.

"Suicide, the marshal claims. Too bad. Lukas killed one of my men, Lute Jarboe, two days ago, while Jarboe was goin' about legitimate business. Sam got to broodin', I guess."

"That's what the marshal said. About this job.'"

"Good pay, not much work, no risk."

"Sounds nice and comfy. Doin' what?"

"Collecting."

"What, and who from?"

"Money, from the cowmen. I'm head of the Wolfhead Protective Association. The cowmen on this range pay us for protection."

"Protection from who—yoreselves?"

Flowers' black eyes narrowed angrily. Then he grinned.

"From rustlers. Nobody seems to know who the rustlers are. But it's a fact that them as pay us regular monthly dues don't lose any cattle, and them as don't have all kinds of bad luck."

"Sam Lukas didn't, I take it."

"That's right," Flowers said. "He'd been payin' off, but when I jacked-up the rates a few days ago he balked. When Lute Jarboe went to collect Sam turned loose a Greener on poor Lute. Tomorrow's the first of the month, and I'm afraid others will try to wriggle out of payin' their honest debts.

"That's where you two come in. News of what's happened here today will spread, and if any two-bit cowman has got the idea of welshin' maybe yore presence will kind of change their minds and avert trouble. I hate violence."

"And a buzzard hates carrion!" Greenriver growled. "Johnny and me, we don't want any part of—"

"When do we start?" Johnny asked.

"At sun-up tomorrow." Ben Flowers' grin broadened. "You'll ride out with me and some of the boys. Always like to have plenty of collectors along. Have another drink."

"Aw-rhh!" Greenriver growled dis-

gustedly. Then he licked his lips. "Don't care if I do."

IT WAS almost mid-morning when they left Wolfhead and rode out onto the sun-baked range. There were seven of them: Johnny Buck, Greenriver Ives and Ben Flowers, and four others, all gun-hung, hard-eyed range toughs.

For a full hour, the night before, old Greenriver had tried to talk Johnny Buck out of this, into saddling and riding far and fast from Wolfhead. But Johnny was adamant, even though he was well aware of what he was getting into. Ben Flowers was crooked as a bunch of rattlesnakes fighting in a cane patch. The Wolfhead Protective Association was just a gang of blackmailers hiding behind a legal name.

If a man paid tribute to them he was left alone. If he refused, his cattle were rustled, his fences cut, his crops destroyed. It was a game that had been played before. It explained Sam Lukas' death, the marshal's fear, the fear and distrust of Bobbie Collins and her kid brother.

They stopped first at the small H-K outfit. Rufe Hogan, a wiry, stooped man with harassed gray features, was mending a corral gate when they rode up and stopped. He started toward the ranch cabin, ostensibly to get his gun, then turned back.

"We've come to collect," Flowers said bluntly.

"But my dues fall on the fifteenth," the rancher protested. "I paid up two weeks ago. They ain't due agin for another two weeks."

"They're due again—now! I've made a little change, Hogan. From here out, payment is due *twice* a month."

The rancher stared. "You mean, you're doublin' what we've got to pay you and yore cut-throat outfit to keep you from—"

"Watch your tongue, Hogan!" Flowers' hand rested on the ivory handle of his six-shooter, and his eyes were cold. "You don't have to pay anything. Nobody's forced to take our services. That bunch of pureblood breeders out yonder, ain't they grazin' powerful close to that cliff-edge?"

"Cows ain't goin' to walk over a cliff."

"Can't ever tell what a cow'll do, especially if somethin' was to spook 'em right sudden. How much would you say that herd's worth, Hogan?"

Hogan cursed helplessly. Gray-faced, he said, "Double what I been payin' you will ruin me. But I reckon that's what you want. You want to crowd us all out, so you can take over."

"Pay up, or shut up!" Flowers said flatly.

Hogan paid. Still cursing bitterly, he took a wad of bills from his pocket and gave them to Flowers.

Flowers laughed, a greedy, wicked sound, whirled his big black and rode away, followed by Johnny Buck, Greenriver and the four hard-cases.

"See what I mean?" Flowers grinned at Johnny. "Maybe some others won't fork over so easy, though."

Johnny said nothing. He knew that if he opened his mouth the fury that was inside him would spew forth, and he wasn't ready for that.

At the next two ranches they visited practically the same thing happened. The ranchers fumed and ranted and threatened, but they paid. Once, indicating Johnny and Greenriver, Flowers said, "See these two gents here? They're the two that tore Wolfhead apart yesterday. They like their meat raw, and they're workin' for me now!"

It was almost midafternoon when they approached a small cluster of ranch buildings huddled beside a cottonwood lined creek. The place looked neat and well kept. The cottonwoods made a deep inviting shade. At one side of the log ranchhouse, near the creek, was a nest of red sandstone cliffs.

"The Star K," grinned one of the toughs. "Boss, you reckon you'll have the same kind of luck as usual collectin' here?"

Flowers frowned. "There's more than one way of collectin'!"

The hard-cases guffawed. They broke through a growth of feathery green tamarisk ringing the yard and drew to a halt before the ranchhouse. There was nobody in sight. Flowers halloed.

FOR a moment, there was no answer, then, from the shadowy interior of the cabin, a voice shrilled, "You get

away from here, Ben Flowers, and take yore gun-snakes with you! I got a scattergun lined square on yore brisket!"

And another voice, "Jefferson, put that shotgun down! I'll attend to this."

Johnny Buck's heart leaped. Even before she appeared in the doorway, he knew that that second voice belonged to Bobbie Collins. Clad now in a soft summer gingham dress that moulded her lissome figure, the girl stepped to the ground and faced the group of horsemen. Her long hair, Johnny thought, was like a golden mist about her flower-like face. She looked frightened, but there was a defiant tilt to her chin too.

Her disdainful gaze touched Johnny Buck and Greenriver, and Johnny saw surprise, and a hurt, reproachful look, flood her gray eyes before she turned them away. He saw the wolf-eager look in Ben Flowers' black eyes as his gaze roved over the girl with deliberate insolence.

Rage seethed inside Johnny Buck. He darted a glance at Greenriver. Greenriver was grinning a little, as if to say, "So this is what yuh been waitin' for!"

Flowers doffed his cream sombrero with a flourish, and bowed low. The girl flushed. Tow-headed, barefooted Jeff had left the cabin and stood beside his sister, defiance and anger making its pattern over his freckled features. He didn't have the shotgun now.

Did these two, Johnny wondered, live here alone?

Bobbie's voice quavered a little. "What do you want?"

"The same as usual," Flowers said, smiling. "We've come to collect."

"And you'll get the same as usual—nothing!"

Flowers frowned, said persuasively, "Now why not be reasonable, Miss Collins? We can't go on this way. We can't render our valuable services free. You haven't paid any dues in four months—not since yore father had his accident."

"It wasn't an accident," Jeff shrilled. "Someone tied his foot in his bronc's stirrup and flogged the bronc to make it run. He was murdered, and I got a good idea who done it!"

"I think he's right, Ben Flowers," Bobbie said. "When Daddy decided to stop paying you blackmail, you had him killed, just like you had Sam Lukas killed. Go ahead, kill me if you want to, but I won't pay you a cent!"

The girl's voice broke, and Johnny saw tears on her tanned cheeks. Her small fists were clenched at her sides.

Ben Flowers swung suddenly to the ground and stepped toward Bobbie Collins.

"Now, now, girl, that's no way to talk," he said softly. "I don't want you hurt. In fact, I'd kill any man who tried to hurt you. I want to be yore friend, to help you."

"Then stay away and let us alone!"

"About the dues you owe—"

"I don't owe you anything!"

"A matter of opinion. If you won't pay in money, I'll have to collect some other way."

"How could you collect?" she asked scornfully.

Flames burned in Flowers' sable eyes as he stared at the girl, and his lips drew tight over his gleaming white teeth.

"This way!" Flowers said, and grabbed hold of her arm and jerked her toward him, his brutal lips seeking her soft red ones.

Bobbie screamed, raked at Flowers' face with the nails of her free hand. Jeff jumped at him, beating at him with small fists. Flowers hurled the boy away with a back-handed slap.

Johnny Buck nudged his buckskin forward. He took one foot from the stirrup, slammed the toe of his boot savagely up under Flowers' chin.

CHAPTER IV

Renegade's Requiem

THE KICK slammed Flowers' head back between his shoulder blades. He reeled backward, stumbled, fell. Johnny Buck cleared leather and hit the ground flat-footed. After their first shock of surprise, the four hard-cases grabbed for their guns.

"Never seed anybody so anxious to meet ol' Satan!" Greenriver drawled. "You hombres set right still." They

looked at the old gun in Greenriver's hand, and froze.

"Get up and get out of here, before I kill you!" Johnny said to Flowers.

Flowers rolled over and sat up. He stared blankly up at Johnny, blood trickling from a corner of his mouth. Then fury flowed like muddy water into his eyes. He clawed upward, grabbing at the same time for his ivory-handled gun.

Johnny stepped in close, slammed his knee up under Flowers' chin. Flowers again flopped back to the ground. He lay there a moment, looking at Johnny, and the very air seemed charged with the rage and wickedness that radiated from him.

"Waugh!" Greenriver snorted, jiggling his gun-muzzle. "You snakes aim to watch that? Why don't yuh do somethin'?"

Johnny stepped back. He said flatly, "Get up, Flowers, and get away from here! I won't tell you again!"

Flowers got slowly to his feet, never taking his hot, hate-filled gaze from the redhead. But he made no further play for his gun.

He said, coldly, "I made a mistake. I should have killed you instead of hiring you."

"You made several of 'em. You got just ten seconds to hit leather and burn air!"

Flowers swung into the saddle. "You fools," he sneered. "None of you will see another sun rise."

Greenriver's old gun bellowed, and Flowers grabbed at the ear-lobe the bullet had nicked. He said nothing, but all the earth's hate and evil and fury blazed in his eyes. Then abruptly he whirled the black and, followed by his henchmen, spurred through the tamarisks that ringed the yard.

Almost instantly, their guns opened up, the bullets horneting about those before the ranchhouse.

"Into the cabin!" Johnny rapped.

Johnny and Greenriver slapped their horses on the rumps and the beasts went galloping out of the yard. Then, shoving Bobbie and Jeff before them, they plunged into the cabin and slammed the door to behind them.

"The dirty, double-crossin' sons!" Jeff yelled. "Where'n perdition's my sawed-off?"

"You stay down," Johnny ordered. "You too, Bobbie!"

Bobbie flashed him a glance that held puzzlement, and gladness too, Johnny thought. Then she opened a dresser drawer and took therefrom an incongruously big six-shooter and started thumbing cartridges into it. Jeff, also ignoring Johnny's order, had found his double-barreled shotgun.

THEY were, Johnny saw, in for a fight. Flowers' gunmen, after that first volley, had dismounted and sought places of vantage and shelter about the cabin. Bitterly, Johnny blamed himself for not having killed Flowers instead of booting him under the chin. Too late for regrets now, though.

Guns were roaring outside again. Window glass shattered as bullets slashed into the cabin.

"Give in!" they heard Flowers bawl. "Give in, or I swear I'll cut all yore fool throats like I would a sheep's!"

"Waugh!" Greenriver yelled back. "Come and get us, yuh bloody 'Pache!" and thunderous sound filled the cabin as he fired through a broken window.

There were three windows in the small ranchhouse, one at each side, and one at the rear. Greenriver was spraying lead from one of these front windows, while Bobby and Jeff were crouched near the other one.

Johnny held his fire, watching, listening. From the gunfire, he judged that two of the gunmen had taken refuge in the barn at one side of the house, while two others had holed up among the nest of cliffs beside the creek on the opposite side and slightly to the front. That left one unaccounted for.

Johnny went through into the kitchen at the back of the cabin. He eased up to the window and peered cautiously out. A hundred feet away was what appeared to be a tool shed. Marching from the back of the ranchhouse to the shed and past it, was a dense row of the feathery green tamarisk. Other patches of the stuff were scattered about the vicinity.

The redhead tensed suddenly. A patch of tamarisk out there ten feet from the shed was quivering, as if something was

moving through it. Then the stalks waved violently, and the figure of a man leaped from the growth toward the open door of the shed.

Startled, Johnny lost a precious second, then snapped up his gun and blazed a shot at that hurtling figure.

It was Ben Flowers, and now Flowers was inside the shed. Johnny knew he had missed. He ducked, swearing, as flame lashed from a chink in the slabbed logs of the shed wall and a bullet snarled wickedly past his head. Futilely, he blasted two more shots at the chink.

He heard a sound, and looked around to find Bobbie Collins beside him. Her face was pale, her eyes wide as she looked at him.

"I heard the shots. I was afraid. . . ."

"Keep down," Johnny said. "I'm all right. Ben Flowers is holed up out there in the tool shed."

She said steadily, "They mean to kill us all, don't they?"

He knew there was no use lying to this girl. He nodded.

"But I got other ideas. Don't be scared."

"I'm not scared. Do we—have a chance?"

"Plenty." Johnny was watching the shed narrowly. "How many men does Flowers have?"

"About ten in all, I think. The other five or six are probably in town. They're riff-raff, tough and evil and cruel. They do what Flowers tells them, because he pays them well. But there's no loyalty in them. Without Flowers to lead them, and pay them, they'd run like coyotes."

"Flowers is out there in that shed alone," Johnny murmured.

The girl demanded, "What do you mean to do?"

Before Johnny could answer, a thunderous blast that dwarfed the six-gun fire sounded in the front room. There was a dull thud, like somebody falling. Johnny and the girl whirled and rushed into the room.

JEFF lay kicking on the floor, the smoking shotgun beside him. There was a dazed look on the youngster's freckled face, and sulphuric language poured from his lips.

"Jefferson!" Bobbie hollered. "Stop such talk or I'll tan your britches! Are you hurt?"

"Naw, I ain't hurt! Cussed shotgun changed ends with me, is all. One of them blankety-blank skunks was tryin' to get away!"

Johnny heard a clatter of hoofs, and jumped to the window. A horse and rider had streaked out from the barn and was already crossing the dry creek. Johnny lowered his gun.

"Goin' to town for help," he said tautly.

"That'll about even it up," Greenriver growled, bristling mustache framing his cherubic, smoke-grimed face. "Scum! Carrion eaters!" He thumbed shells savagely into his Peacemaker.

Half an hour passed, punctuated by desultory gunfire. Bullets snarled and hissed, but did little or no damage. Flowers and his gunnies were keeping well under cover. Awaiting reenforcements, Johnny Buck thought grimly. By the time they got back it would be night.

The odds would be too great. Johnny knew it, they all knew it. A stalemate now, but with the coming of night and reenforcements, there could be but one ending.

Johnny had returned to the kitchen window. Flowers was still holed up in the tool shed. There was only one aperture through which he could fire, the chink between the two logs. Occasionally flame licked out from this chink, and a bullet slashed through the kitchen window.

Johnny Buck returned these shots, hammering at the chink. He had little hope of hitting anything, for Flowers was playing a safe and waiting game, but he wanted the killer leader to know he was on the job.

Time was on Flowers' side. He could afford to wait. After that first try, he had not asked for surrender. He wanted them dead. He would kill them as brutally as he had killed Sam Lukas and Bobbie Collins' father.

For those inside the cabin, time was swiftly running out. The sun was less than half an hour above the distant hills.

There was a back door to the kitchen. Johnny lifted the latch and opened it a

crack. Then he stepped back to the window. He placed his hat on the end of his gun-barrel and waved it across the narrow window.

Instantly, Flowers blazed two shots at it. As quickly, Johnny dropped the hat, shoved the gun-muzzle from the window and blasted four swift bullets through the chink in the tool shed. Those bullets, he knew, would drive Flowers back from the opening for several seconds.

He whirled, shoved open the back door, slid through, and closed the door behind him. Without waste motion, he leaped across the ten feet of space that separated the door from the row of tamarisk, flung himself to the ground behind the shrubs. Here he was out of sight of Flower's men.

Apparently Flowers, driven away from the chink by Johnny's slashing bullets, had not seen him leave the cabin.

The lanky redhead drew a deep, uneven breath as he reloaded his six. If he were discovered here, with only the feathery tamarisk for shelter, he would be cut to shreds. But there was no turning back even if he'd wanted to.

HUGGING the ground, he started wriggling along behind the tamarisk toward the tool shed. Near the ground the growth was especially dense. He had little fear of Flowers seeing him, but he couldn't be entirely silent.

A single tiny sound might bring a hail of lead slashing and snapping through the fronds. The cabin slid away behind him with agonizing slowness. Twenty feet, forty. . . . A twig snapped under his hand and the sound seemed thunderous. He froze, heart in his throat, flesh quivering. But nothing happened.

Seventy feet. . . . The gunfire from the cabin, from the cliffs and barn, seemed a vast distance away. It seemed not to concern him at all. Here, directly before him, was harsh reality. Here, within the next few seconds, was life or death. For himself, for Greenriver Ives, for a slender, yellow-haired girl and a youngster.

If he failed, all of them died. The knowledge was like a cold dark weight inside him. But it sent him forward, too. It brought him to his knees, to his feet.

It sent him hurtling through the tamarisk, gun in hand, and straight into the open doorway of the tool shed. He braked to a halt, half-blinded by the sudden change from sunlight to shadows.

He heard a sound like the startled spitting of a tomcat, and then he saw Flowers, dimly in the shadows. Flowers had been half-crouched, his gun-muzzle shoved through the chink between the logs. But now, as Johnny Buck crashed through the tamarisk and loomed in the doorway, the killer boss whirled, swinging his gun-muzzle in a swift arc.

Johnny felt the burn of the bullet across his ribs. He fired, and saw Flowers knocked half about and against the logs. But the tall dark man recoiled from the wall. He ran at Johnny, gun out-thrust, his dark face an ugly pattern of insensate fury and hate.

Johnny jumped aside, trying to get from in front of that brawling gun, but stumbled over some object on the dirt floor and fell. He rolled, and fired almost straight up, focusing his eyes dimly on Flowers' dark hurtling figure. He fired again, and again, still rolling.

His head slammed against the base of an anvil. The interior of the tool shed seemed to explode in a red burst of lights. He caught hold of the anvil and clawed desperately to his feet, trying to find Flowers with his eyes, not knowing whether his gun was empty.

Then he saw Flowers, on the ground. Flowers lay motionless, sprawled grotesquely, and Johnny knew he was dead.

He drew a shuddering breath. There was no sound of firing anywhere now. Apparently the sudden savage burst of gunfire from the tool shed had startled and puzzled Flowers' henchmen.

Now, from the cliffs, a voice called, "Are yuh all right, Boss? What's goin' on over there?"

Johnny yelled back, "Ben Flowers is dead. Any more fightin' you do on this range will be for free, with a good chance that yuh'll be hangtree fruit to boot. You gents'd better high-tail while yuh got the chance!"

"Yeah?" the voice jeered. "That's an old trick, mister, whoever yuh are, and

it won't work!"

Johnny stooped, caught Ben Flowers under the armpits and lifted him. Holding the dead man in front of him, he stepped into the doorway of the shed, in full view of the three denned-up gunmen.

"Here's the kind of trick it is," he said.

He turned loose of Flowers, jumped back into the shadows. Flowers caved to the ground.

For a moment there was a deep, shocked silence. Johnny Buck pressed his advantage.

"There lies Ben Flowers," he called. "There lies the man that paid you, kept yuh in grub and whiskey, and protected you from the law. But if you're bound to fight some more, come a-smokin'. If yuh don't, I'm comin' after you!"

The silence held for a moment longer. Then the voice of the unseen man, defeated and dejected, yelled, "We got enough! We ain't riskin' our hides for nothin'. We got yore word you'll hold yore fire if we ride out?"

"If you do it quick, and don't come back!"

"Don't worry, we're through. Sun-up won't find none of us on this range!"

Johnny said nothing. Exultation lifted inside him and flowed like wine through his veins. Bobbie had been right. These hired gun-slammers possessed no sense of loyalty. They were fleeing like rats from a storm-doomed ship.

They were riding out, bent low in saddles, not looking back, quirting their horses. Sounds of their going died, and they vanished, and peace lay again over the Star K.

Johnny Buck stepped over Ben Flowers' still body and out into the last red rays of the setting sun. Greenriver, Bobbie and Jeff had seen and heard what happened. They had left the ranchhouse and were coming toward him. Bobbie, in the lead, was almost running, her loose yellow hair like a golden mist.

She came up close to him, anxiety on her tanned face.

"Are you all right?" she asked breathlessly.

"I'm fine," Johnny grinned, looking into her gray eyes.

Greenriver and Jeff came up then. Greenriver was chewing furiously at his cud of tobacco. Jeff was lugging the shotgun.

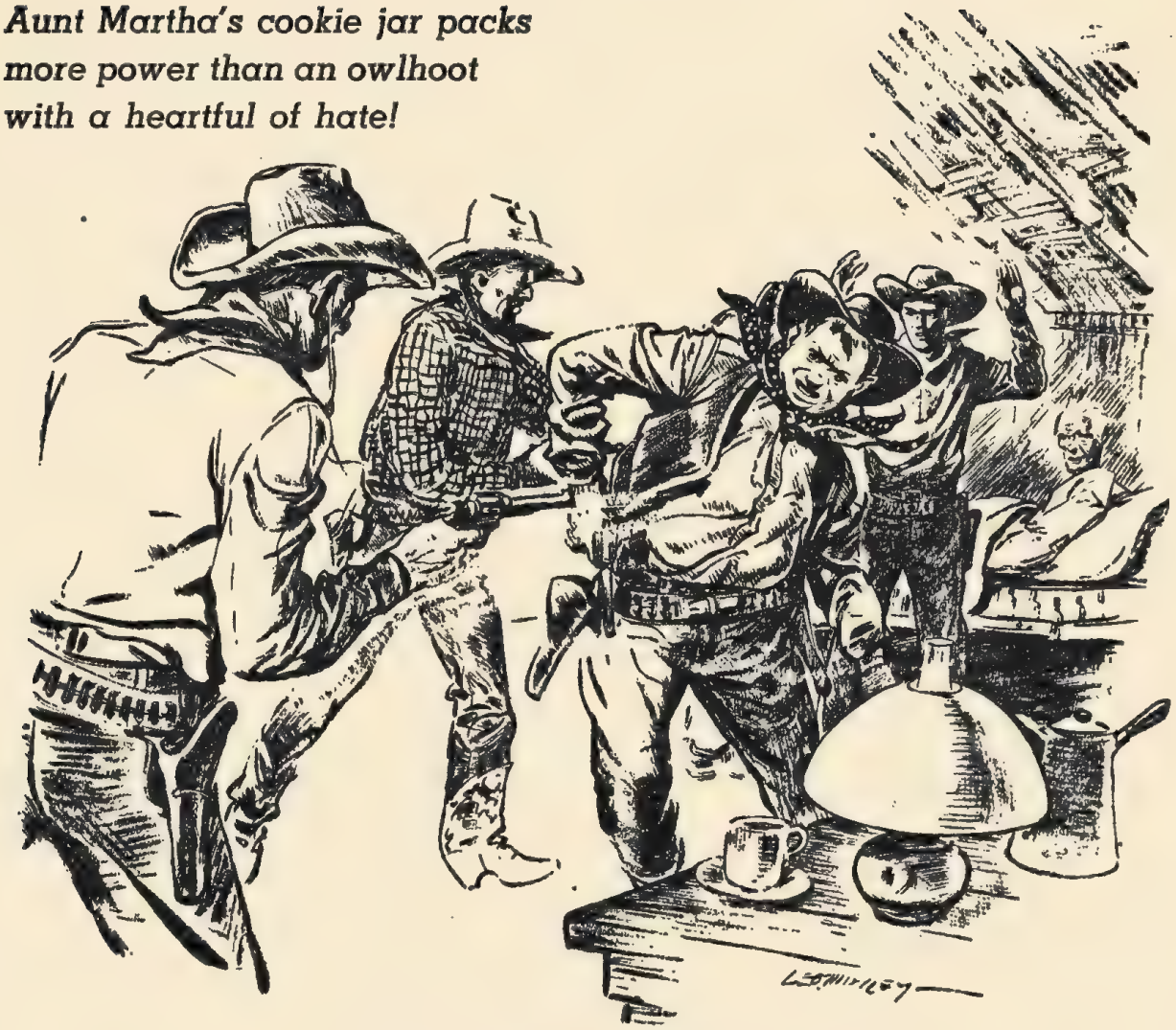
"We fixed 'em!" Jeff crowed. "We showed 'em what for. I'd like just one more chance, though, to line this sawed-off on the slimy, blankety-blank so-and-so's briskets!"

Greenriver darted an expectant glance at Bobbie. But she wasn't paying any attention to Jeff's cussin'. She was looking at Johnny Buck, and Johnny was looking at her.

"Waugh!" Greenriver growled disgustedly. "One cussed she-male can cause more trouble than a whole passel o' warrin' redskins. I swear so!"

Running afoul of Black Yazzi, the medicine man, brave Chee Klay battles schemers and renegades to keep sacred the treasure of the Eternal Cave in NAVAJO NIGHT RIDERS, an exciting novelet by CLEE WOODS — featured in next month's issue!

Aunt Martha's cookie jar packs more power than an owlhoot with a heartful of hate!



When Yuma Red entered, Barton Land dug for his gun

BULLET TITLE TO HELL

By BURL TUTTLE

JUNCTION CITY was doomed to die before it ever pulsed with life. But Yuma Red Kincaid was not worried about that. His wiry grin and harsh features remained fixed when he turned in the saddle to watch the townspeople building the new town. To him it was just another settlement below Red River.

"You'll still have the main railroad runnin' through yore tanktown," he told Barton Land, developer of the new townsite. "Whatcha worried about, anyhow?"

An ugly scar stood out, an angry slash against the prison pallor of Yuma Red's left cheek. Two stretches in the pen and several years on the owlhoot had left scars on his heart, too. He wore the wolf brand like a veteran.

"I promised those people the railroad would build its branchline and junction, with shops and roundhouse here," Barton Land replied, troubled. "Now, they won't understand that Clyde Parker must have bribed some crooked officials to shoot the branch line down the east bank of Buffalo Creek, through his own nester colony.

Folks will think I'm a crook."

Yuma Red spurred his horse up beside the tall, lanky townsite builder's horse. He snorted his contempt. "Stop worryin'," he said. "I'll see you git a title to Bill Crane's land—or hand him a smoke title to hell. The railroad can't build a junction there—not if you own the land, can they?"

All Yuma Red could think of was what a weak-kneed sister Barton Land had grown to be. He had been quite a promising younker, back in the days when they had been inseparable friends. Powdery dust funneled up from their horses' hoofs and hung like a cloud in the sweltering air. Land's thin lips tightened but he did not reply to Kincaid's comment. Yuma Red tried again.

"Since I pulled in yesterday," he said, "I ain't heard you say one word about shootin' Bill Crane. You ain't forgot he's the one that hired killers to chouse our folks off the old home spreads, stealin' our outfits, I reckon, Bart?"

BARTON LAND clawed at the knot in the blue bandana neckerchief at his throat, as if it were choking him. He did not look at Kincaid.

"Back in those days, Red," he said, "men stood pat on a six-shooter full. Big range hogs ate up the little shirt-tail cowmen. But the homestead law robbed Bill Crane of all he had stolen from other cowmen. Now, he's old and broken and destitute. All he owns is a few acres and a handful of cows.

Yuma Red laughed harshly, his black eyes smoldered with venom. "You be legal as you want to be," he said. "Pay him for his land and git him to sign the papers. Then, I'll stick out my hand and tell him what he owes for the cow outfis he stole off'n our dads. I won't kill him if he tries to pay up his honest debts." Yuma Red grinned wolfishly.

"Now, listen, Red—" Barton Land began.

"Quit beefin'. If I have to shoot him all you have to do is claim it was self-defense," Red said.

"It'll be plain murder, and I'll call it that!"

Yuma Red looked at Land searchingly. "Me'n you was raised like peas in a pod."

"Red, I'm not going to let you murder that old man!"

For a moment there was a vicious glitter in Yuma Red Kincaid's black eyes. He laughed harshly.

"How you figger on stoppin' me, Barton?" he husked almost in a whisper.

"Look, Red," Barton Land said earnestly, "Twenty years ago Bill Crane needed killing. Today, he's a repentent, broken old man."

They rode in silence for a time. Finally they put their horses across Buffalo Creek, through a fringe of willows on the opposite bank. They rode stirrup-to-stirrup across a lush meadow where a dozen fat steers grazed, and presently they came in sight of the squatty sod hut and lean-to outhouses that Bill Crane owned. Lights kindled in Yuma Red's black eyes.

""This time, it ain't the gun-totin' Circle C riders comin' across the crick to chouse our folks off their places, Barton," he said. "I'd of got around to this chore a long time ago only I stopped off too often in jails—and places."

Barton Land cut a cold glance at his companion. "If you pick a ruckus with Bill Crane, I'll be bound to stop you, Red," he said.

"If you pull a gun on me, Barton, I'll kill yuh." Yuma Red Kincaid's tone was flat but definite.

Land gave Kincaid a smoldering glance as he pulled off to one side and rode apart.

An old woman, with a sunbonnet shading a withered, kindly face, came out of the soddy.

"Is Crane at home?" Barton Land asked.

"Why, yessir, stranger. He's waitin' for Clyde Parker to come over and close a deal for this place here. Railroad company, looks like, wants to build a junction here. Who be you boys, anyhow?" She squinted up from under the sunbonnet.

"I'm Jim Kincaid," Red told her. "My pard here, he's Barton Land. Reckon you remember those names, ma'am."

The old woman's face brightened. "Lands sakes!" she cried. "I used to go to school with both your maws. You boys light down and rest yourselves. Bill and me both will sure enjoy this visit!"

"Who's out there, Martha?" a voice bellowed from the sod house.

Bill Crane came out, gray eyes twinkling in a bearded, jovial face. The old man, shirtless and barefooted, looked like

a game rooster, with his thin gray hair shooting up like the comb of a game cock. Land and Yuma Red stepped down from their saddles. The old woman offered introductions. Bill Crane strutted forward, hand extended in welcome. Yuma Red spat contemptuously, refused the proffered hand.

"I ain't here on no mission of peace," he rasped out.

The sparkle died in Bill Crane's eyes. For an instant, he stood there, a grim old man, facing the realities of the past. "I don't blame you, boy," he said slowly. "You hate me, don't you?"

"I hate yuh plenty!" Yuma Red's lips peeled back in a snarl. He rocked forward on the balls of his feet, hands close to holsters. "I thought I'd let Barton do business with you first," he declared tightly. "But if you had a gun I'd kill you now."

"I'll git a gun," the old man said softly. "I don't like to disappoint nobody." He turned back toward the house.

"Bill Crane! You danged old fool!" the old lady cried. "He aims to kill you!"

"Martha, you keep outa this," Crane warned her.

Barton Land stepped close to Yuma Red, eyes blazing. "Fork your horse and make tracks from here," he ordered. "I told you I wouldn't let you go through with a shoot out."

With an arrogant shrug, Yuma Red started to turn away from Land just as Bill Crane came out of the house with a gun in his hand. Barton Land lashed out unexpectedly with clubbed fists. Yuma Red stumbled back under the blow that connected with his chin. He drew his guns as he recovered—and then he saw Barton Land standing there, covering him. There was Bill Crane, too, eyes cold as snow and a gun in a steady hand.

YUMA RED KINCAID could start it and kill them both. He hesitated for a dangerous uncertain moment, thinking back. There were a lot of things to think back over, things that had never cankered in Yuma Red's outlaw heart.

"You can't do it, Red," Barton Land said softly.

Red looked hard at Crane. "You willin' to sell this place to Land here, instead of Clyde Parker?" he asked pointedly.

"Didn't know Barton Land wanted to buy the spread," the old man said. "If he offers enough I'll sell. I'd rather not sell to Parker. He's the skunk who brought the nesters in and stole my rangeland. Shore, I'll sell out to Land—that is, if you'll fork yore hoss and git off'n my proppity! I don't want it ever said I was forced into makin' a deal!"

"Holster them guns, then," Yuma Red ordered.

Barton Land obeyed without hesitation. Bill Crane holstered his reluctantly. Kincaid turned to his horse, stepped into the saddle and headed for a fringe of willows near the creek. From a thicket he looked back and saw Bill Crane shaking hands with Barton Land. A hard, cruel smile flicked his thin lips. He would wait until the deal was closed, then ride in and collect from Bill Crane. He could avoid a shoot-out with his boyhood saddle pard this way. He'd let Barton Land ride away before his showdown with Crane.

He caught a flash of something moving through the brush up the creek. Alert and wary from years on the owlhoot, he started for his guns when a shot thundered up ahead. Then, he knew it was too late. The sounds of a horse crashing through the brush told him the unseen bushwhacker was making his getaway. Out there in the yard he saw Bill Crane sprawled.

Barton Land stood beside the fallen man, looking out toward the willows. Nobody had to tell Yuma Red what Barton Land was thinking.

"He believes I bushwhacked the old hellion!"

Slowly he closed in on the spot where the bushwhacker had lurked.

He found horse tracks and scattered cigarette butts, evidence that the killer had waited there for some time.

Kincaid followed the trail until it finally faded out in the willow brakes. Cautiously, he retraced his tracks and headed for the cabin. The killer might have doubled back, he figured. He might be watching the place now.

Yuma Red left his horse in the brush and went on foot across the yard. Inside the house he heard voices. "No, I don't believe Yuma Red fired that shot," he heard Barton Land say. "Red isn't a bushwhacker. He don't have to be. He could have shot us both down out there

in the yard and walked away from that ruckus on both feet. You're plumb wrong about Yuma Red, Crane."

"Protectin' the dirty little killer, eh?" Bill Crane rumbled. "Mebbe you'n him framed the deal like that—scared as hell of a stove-up old man like me!"

Yuma Red looked through the window and saw Bill Crane propped up in bed, a gun in each hand. The old man's eyes blazed under shaggy brows. A bandage high on his right shoulder indicated that he was not badly wounded. Martha, his wife, stood beside the bed trying to reason with him. Barton Land looked worried.

"Then you won't sell me your land, Crane?" he asked softly, his eyes taking on a bleak look.

"Not onless you ride for the sheriff and put a posse on the trail of that dirty little bushwhacker!" the old man snorted. "Otherwise, I'll sell to Clyde Parker when he comes."

"Askin' me to put the law on Red Kincaid is like askin' me to hang my own brother," he said with feeling. "Red didn't shoot you, Crane!"

Martha Crane looked at Barton Land. "Bill won't sell you that land," she predicted. "Bad as he hates Clyde Parker, he won't deal with you unless you do as he says."

YUMA RED KINCAID felt strangely warm inside, listening to his boyhood friend side him at a time when he had everything to gain if he turned on him. He knew how much Barton wanted Crane's land. Junction City would be practically ruined if the railroad were to build the junction here. Yuma Red was ready to step in and take a hand. He hesitated when he heard booted feet out front.

From the doorway a voice called, "Why, hello, Bill—what you doin' in bed!"

Bill Crane snorted. "Clyde Parker, don't you'n yore gang come bargin' into my house 'thout knockin'!"

Yuma Red saw Parker, a large man in whipcords, broad-brimmed black hat and hand-tooled boots, standing in the front doorway. A moon-shaped face beamed under the hat brim. There was a look of triumph in his eyes as he glanced around the room and stopped at Barton Land.

"So, Barton, you rode over to try and dicker with Crane for his land, eh?" Parker chuckled. "Well, I brought the money in cash." He flashed a thick roll of greenbacks. "Crane, you ready to do business?" he asked the old man on the bed.

"Yep!" Bill Crane declared. "Providin' yuh'll send a man in for the sheriff and put a posse on the trail of the little killer who bushwhacked me!"

Parker shot a glance at the two gunslicks who came in behind him. "I'll go in person and 'tend to that little chore," he promised. "Now, Bill, you just sign on the dotted line." He held out a legal looking paper.

Through the window Barton Land's glance met Yuma Red's cold stare. He signaled with a jerk of his head, indicating that Kincaid must hit the trail.

"I'll go for the sheriff myself, Crane," he said dryly. "If I don't go, Parker will. I want to be sure the sheriff gets the story straight."

"Now, that's what I wanted to hear!" Bill Crane declared. "Shows you're honest. I'm gonna sell you my land, Barton. I'd a danged sight rather deal with anybody but Parker!"

Martha Crane cut in softly, "Stop your bellerin', Bill Crane."

Clyde Parker signaled his two gunmen. Before Bill Crane knew what was taking place, Parker slapped the guns from his hands, and he whipped around to cover Barton Land. His two men fanned out, guns drawn.

"I had it figured out you'd maybe want to deal with Land instead of me," Parker said to Crane. "That's why I tried to bushwhack you when I seen you shakin' hands with him in the yard."

The oldster stiffened against the pillows. "Why dang yore snaky hide, Parker, you couldn't of gotten away with it anyhow. No one could take over my land without my sellin' it to them."

"That's where you figured wrong." Parker smiled, tapping his breast pocket. "I just bought up that thousand dollar mortgage you owed the bank. It expires shortly."

YUMA RED, looking through the window, jerked his head to let Barton Land know he was going around to the front door. Barton stood there, hands shoulder high, under the muzzles of those

outlaw guns. Yuma Red sidled around the house and reached the door unseen just in time to hear Bill Crane roar angrily.

"I'll pay off that mortgage with the money Barton Land gives me for my spread!" the old man declared with heat. "That mortgage won't do yuh any good, Parker!"

"Won't it?" Parker said softly. "That's where you figured wrong, my friend. There won't be anybody around alive to pay it off when it comes due. You'll be dead, Crane, along with your wife and Land. I'll just foreclose and take over the property." He grinned crookedly.

"I reckon I'd better pull your fangs, mister," one of the gun-slicks told Land. "Stand hitched. I'm takin' them guns of your'n." He moved forward.

Barton Land said dryly, "Don't try it!"

The gun-hand hesitated, "Gittin' yourself killed now won't help none."

"I'll get killed anyway, soon as you get my guns," Barton replied. "If you hellions are goin' to murder Bill Crane and the rest of us I might as well go out shootin'. The law will catch up with you and your killers in the end."

Parker smiled, "I had that figured out, too—and so'll the sheriff. Yuma Red Kincaid has bragged around how he was goin' to salivate Bill Crane. The law will think you and this old woman here just got in the way of some of his lead."

Lying in bed, Crane was the first to see Yuma Red enter the room, guns drawn. His look of surprise caused Parker to whip around. His heavy jowled face blanched. He brought up his gun. Yuma Red's first bullet caught him in the chest. Parker's bullet slammed through the floor as he went down.

Barton Land dug for his guns. One of the gunmen dropped him with a blast. Bill Crane clawed under his pillow and came up with a double-barreled Derringer the outlaws had not found when they disarmed him. The two gunhawks whirled—and Kincaid killed them.

His bullets were like a wanton rage unleashed as they went down. He stood over them, with blue smoke curling from the muzzles of his guns. Martha Crane screamed. Barton Land sat up gasping.

Yuma Red looked down at him, smiling tightly. "You shot bad?" he asked.

Barton shook his head. "A hunk of lead hurts, but I'll get over this one."

From the bed, Bill Crane bellowed, "Look out, Red, Parker ain't dead!"

Yuma Red whipped around and saw Parker raised up on one elbow a six-gun aimed at him. The thunder of Bill Crane's Derringer sounded. Parker slumped back with a bullet through his head.

Yuma Red smiled. "Thanks, Crane. That bushwhackin' skunk would have back-shot me if it hadn't been for yore hideout gun. I reckon I owe you somethin'."

"Not a plugged nickel, Kincaid," the old man said, grinning. "But if you'll take the money Barton Land is goin' to pay me for this place, I reckon maybe it'll sort of square up in a way for some of the ornery things I done to yore folks."

Yuma Red Kincaid weighed that in silence. Barton Land would have this property, forcing the railroad to build its junction at his townsite down the line. A few dollars, more or less, would mean very little to Yuma Red. Vengeance was not as sweet as it should have been, he thought. It was a long way back to the past. He glanced around the room, stopping on Martha Crane's sweet old face, her eyes shining with gratitude.

"No," he said flatly. "I don't want nothin' from you, Bill Crane. The debt you mentioned has been paid in full. Keep yore money. You're an old man and I reckon you and Martha will need all of it!" He turned to leave, stopped at the door and glanced back at Martha Crane. "You might fill that cooky jar like you used to, Aunt Martha," he said boyishly. "I might be droppin' by one o' these days to try 'em out."

Look Forward to BAD JIGGER, a Smash-Packed Complete Novelet Featuring Walt Slade, by BRADFORD SCOTT — Coming Soon!

Shoving his weapon into the holster, Gunsmoke practised a couple of swift draws

Gunsmoke's Happy New Year

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

The merry tune of wedding bells is almost drowned out by six-gun roar when Morgan comes back to his old diggin's!

EARLY in the afternoon on the last day of the year, "Gunsmoke" Morgan returned to the little mining camp of Gunsmoke, named after the sobriquet that had been attached to him in his young and reckless days.

When the gold strike had been made in the vicinity of what was known now as Gunsmoke Gap, there had been considerable genuine gunsmoke drifting on the mountain air, and Morgan's guns had produced their share of it.

He had earned a reputation in those days for fast drawing and accurate shooting, but it was said of him by all men that he never had drawn and shot except on the side of fairness and justice or in defense of his own life.

Now, Gunsmoke came to a stop beside a huge rock from the close vicinity of which the wind had cleared the snow, and shaded his eyes with a hand as he looked down the slope at the cluster of log buildings which formed the camp of Gunsmoke.

His eyes misted slightly as his memories carried him back thirty years. He had come here with the first gold rush, and after the rush petered out, leaving only a couple of small mines behind it, he had remained for quite some time.

His brother had died, leaving a son, Jim. The boy's mother had died soon afterward, when Jim had been ten. Since then, Gunsmoke had thrown his protection around the boy, and had watched him grow to be twenty-five, a decent and robust young man anybody could be proud to call nephew.

With Jim able to stand on his own feet as superintendent of the smaller of the two mines, Gunsmoke had wandered away to other fields to engage in various pursuits, but had returned every year or so for a visit to the old diggings. And here he was returning again on the last day of the year.

Gunsmoke had traveled from the county-seat, starting at dawn, eager to reach the camp for New Year's Eve. For this evening, at the little log church, Jim Morgan, his nephew, was to be married to Lucinda Weller, the camp's school teacher, whose father had been a pioneer there and Gunsmoke's close friend.

Gunsmoke was thinking of the old-timers now as he squinted against the glare of sun on snow and looked over the camp below. Smoke curled from the chimneys, and the scent of burning pine was heavy in the air. Moving black dots revealed where men and women went along the main street. The two mines up in the Gulch no doubt had closed for the holidays, Gunsmoke thought.

HE REMEMBERED how New Year's Eve had been celebrated in the old days, and knew there had been little change. Heavy gunfire welcomed the New Year on the stroke of twelve, and New Year's Day was a time of recuperation from the celebration of the evening before, of eating heavily, and of sitting around the stove in George Balman's general store and bragging about the prosperity the New Year would bring.

During the last few years, Gunsmoke had been absent from the camp for long intervals. He had put some money aside, and had invested it shrewdly. Rumors drifting into the camp had proclaimed that Gunsmoke had struck it rich in the mining game, and in an unusual manner.

Years before, during the wild gold rush days, he had bought mining stock in several claims during the usual fever. After a lapse of years, one had been the scene of an unexpected, profitable strike. Two companies fighting for control had brought old stock out of hiding, and Gunsmoke had sold half his for a high price and had retained the remainder so he could cash in on dividends.

But he remained the old Gunsmoke. Sudden affluence did not change him. For instance, just now he had a pack on his back and snowshoes on his feet, and his clothing was that of an ordinary miner drifting around looking for a job.

During his various absences, he had corresponded regularly with old George Balman, who had started the first store in Gunsmoke and still owned and operated it. Balman was a prolific correspondent, and gave Gunsmoke all the gossip of the camp.

Gunsmoke replied with a few brief lines produced after the manner of a man accomplishing a necessary distasteful task, writing laboriously with tongue in cheek and pencil gripped until his knuckles showed white. His nephew, Jim, was not much better at the correspondence game.

And now Jim was to be married and start the New Year with a pretty and sensible bride. Jim had written to urge Gunsmoke to be there for the ceremony, and there had been a dainty letter from Lucinda Weller, too. Gunsmoke had arranged to be there, and intended remaining for some time in the old camp.

reliving the old days.

He could not explain to himself why he had made the journey from the county-seat to the camp on snowshoes and with a pack on his back. He certainly could have hired somebody to drive him in a sleigh or bobsled. But he did not wish to arrive in style; he wanted to be the old Gunsmoke.

In the pack he had a new black suit, boiled shirts and new boots, so he could be "dressed up" for his nephew's wedding. And he had not forgotten wedding presents; they were in the pack also.

Gunsmoke turned from his view of the camp and lifted his face for a close scrutiny of the sky. It was cloudless now, and Gunsmoke judged out of his experience that New Year's Day would be one of bright sunshine, appropriate for the start of a wedded life. Jim was lucky, he thought. Lucinda was a fine girl, and her father had been a fine man. Jim had chosen wisely.

With a mittened hand, Gunsmoke brushed away surface snow and took a handful of the clean stuff underneath, to carry it to his mouth for use instead of water. He adjusted his pack and started down the slope over the snow.

Now that the camp was in sight, he was remembering that, in his most recent letter, George Balman had hinted of the possibility of trouble.

Bart Gurney, owner of one of the two small mines up the Gulch, was growing too big for his breeches, Balman had written. Gurney was one of the pioneers, only a few years younger than Gunsmoke. He was a bachelor of almost fifty, and considered himself a rugged individual of much prominence. Gurney liked to think of himself as boss of the camp, making decisions with more vigor than justice.

GUNSMOKE traveled down the slope quickly and entered the end of the street. His eyes swept over the hillside, dotted with human habitations made of logs and rock. His own cabin was up there, a commodious affair he had enlarged on his last visit, and smoke was curling out of the chimney. A glow went through his body. He was home.

Then he remembered that he had informed Jim he could have the cabin for himself and wife. Gunsmoke could bunk at the store with Balman, a widower, or somewhere else. He had sent Jim the first wedding present in advance—a bank draft the proceeds from which was to be spent for new furnishings for the cabin.

Before Gunsmoke encountered any of the old-timers who knew him, he ran into Jim as he emerged from the store with his arms full of bundles. There was a period of joyous cries and backslapping.

"Just goin' to the cabin, Uncle Ed," Jim said. "Step right along. I'd take your pack, but I've got my arms full of stuff."

"Reckon I can manage the pack," Gunsmoke replied, grinning. The boy had called him "Uncle Ed." He was "Gunsmoke" to practically everybody else. "How's everything, Jim?"

"Couldn't be better, Uncle Ed. Everything fixed for our weddin' at the church tonight. They're havin' the usual watch party to see the New Year in. We'll be married durin' that. We went to the county-seat and got some new furniture and fixin's for the cabin. You won't know your old home."

" 'Tain't mine. I'm givin' it to you for a weddin' present, Jim. How's Lucinda?"

"She's fine! Haven't seen her since last evenin'. A gang of women have her in charge today, gettin' ready for the weddin'."

They tramped up the hillside to the cabin and went in. Gunsmoke made a critical inspection of it, and was satisfied.

"You didn't spend all the money I sent," he accused.

"Didn't need it all, Uncle Ed. Lucinda said to save some of it for you."

"I can struggle along without it, boy. You keep what's left. It's your furnishin' fund. You'll be needin' this and that from time to time. What plans have you made?"

"We're comin' right here after we leave the church. I've been buyin' and packin' in grub."

"I'll bunk with George Balman, boy. But if Lucinda cooks a New Year's dinner tomorrow, I want an invite."

"You don't need an invite, Uncle Ed. This cabin is open for you any time you want to come in. Bunk with Balman for a few days, then stay here. You ain't goin' to run away quick this time, are you?"

"Plannin' on stayin' awhile and visitin' with the old bunch," Gunsmoke replied. "You go ahead with whatever you're doin', Jim. I'll leave my pack for the time bein' and drift down to the street and say howdy to the old-timers. I'll come back here to dress for your weddin' and go to the church with you. Got some fancy duds."

"Get back before dark. I'll rustle up some hot grub."

"You'll have a wife cookin' for you come tomorrow mornin'," Gunsmoke reminded him, grinning. "She goin' to keep on teaching school?"

"Nope. Got a new teacher comin' to take over after this holiday vacation."

Gunsmoke's manner was that of a man whose mind was on something he did not mention in his talk. He undid his pack and took from it an old belt and holster, the belt shell-studded and the holster holding an old six-gun.

"Goin' gunnin' for somebody?" Jim asked, smiling.

"Been a long time since I did that," Gunsmoke replied. "I just want to take this old gun down to the store and clean it up while I talk to George Balman. Better than whittlin'."

HE BUCKLED on the belt and went to the door, where he stopped and turned.

"I'll leave my snowshoes outside," he said. "By the way, Jim, are you in any trouble?"

"Trouble? What makes you think that, Uncle Ed? I'm goin' to be married tonight—"

"Didn't reckon you'd have trouble with Lucinda. Balman hinted at somethin' in his last letter to me. Somethin' about Bart Gurney."

"Oh, that!" Jim's face sobered instantly. "It's nothin' to worry me much."

"What's it all about, Jim?"

"I'll talk to you about it later, Uncle Ed, when you come back for supper. You hustle along now and say howdy to your old gang."

Gunsmoke's head was held high and his back was straight as he tramped down the path to the street, his boots squeaking as he trod the snow. In the street, he began meeting old friends and acquaintances, stopped frequently to talk, but hurried on as soon as he could to get to the store. He wanted to talk to George Balman.

The old storekeeper eyed him when he noticed the belt and gun after Gunsmoke had removed his muffler and heavy outer coat. Balman was busy getting food together for the night watch party, so Gunsmoke sat down near the pot-bellied stove, into which he had tossed a couple of chunks of wood as he had done for years whenever he had visited Balman in winter.

Three citizens saw him and greeted him, then hurried on their way; everybody in the camp was going to the church to see Jim's wedding to Lucinda. Balman, finally at leisure, sat down a couple of feet from Gunsmoke.

Gunsmoke had helped himself to some rags and a can of gun oil he had found beneath the counter. He had placed an empty keg in front of him, and was slowly and methodically taking the old gun apart and preparing to clean and oil it.

"Dang me, Gunsmoke, if it don't recall old times to see you gettin' ready to take the warpath," Balman told him. "Who's got you riled?"

"This here what I'm doin' is just for effect—maybe," Gunsmoke replied. "It all depends. George, you tell me somethin', and tell me all of it. What'd you mean in your last letter about Bart Gurney?"

"I'll make it short, Gunsmoke. Gurney is an old bach."

"He's fifty and I'm fifty-five. We were always havin' trouble when we were youngsters and the first strike was made here. Bart Gurney always wanted to be the big man of the camp."

"He still does," Balman related.

"What's he up to now?"

"Well, your nephew Jim and Lucinda Weller have been keepin' company for three or four years. After Jim was appointed the mine superintendent's

job, they got serious. Jim figured he could support a wife."

"Yeah, but what about Gurney?" Gunsmoke demanded.

"About the time Jim and Lucinda decided they could prepare to set up housekeepin', Gurney got the idea that he should stop bein' a bach and get married. Lucinda was about the only girl fittin' hereabouts. We run more to old women, married women and girl kids."

"So I know."

"Gurney decided he would confer a great honor on Lucinda and ask her to marry him."

"What?" Gunsmoke roared. "Him marry a nice girl like Lucinda? Why, the tobacco-chewin', whiskey-guzzlin', cussin', slave-drivin' old buzzard! He's so crooked he can't walk straight."

"He's all of that and worse," the storekeeper admitted. "But he seemed to reckon as how he would be doin' Lucinda a great honor to marry her, she bein' an orphan and teachin' school for a livin' and all."

"Why, the old fool! What happened?"

"She informed him quite ladylike, so I've heard tell, that she was in love with another man and engaged to him and didn't intend to change her mind any."

GUNSMOKE grinned at the storekeeper and nodded approval.

"Good for her!"

"Bart Gurney laughed and tried to make her decide his way. Made the mistake of makin' fun of Jim, and Lucinda blistered him with her tongue right here in this store in front of folks."

"She's got spirit, that girl."

"Yeah," Balman agreed. "Then, Bart Gurney started gettin' nasty to Jim. Figgered he could pester a man and folks wouldn't get riled at him as if he was pesterin' a woman."

"Well, what'd he do?" Gunsmoke inquired. "Never heard a man beat around the bush like you're doin'!"

"He tried to get some of Jim's men to leave the mine and come to his. That didn't work. Jim's a fair boss, and you know how Gurney's regarded by his workmen. Then he tried to pick on Jim and get him into a fight, but Jim laughed it off. Gurney's a huge man. Maybe he figgered he could hurt Jim bad."

"Maybe so," Gunsmoke said. "What else?"

"He began hintin' around that he'd bust up Jim's weddin' with Lucinda. Didn't state how he'd do it, only to say he'd bust up the watch party if the preacher who came from the county-seat tried to marry 'em."

"How's he expect to do that? I know that preacher. No Bart Gurney can bluff him."

"Well, Gurney's had his gang of men in town from the mine since yesterday mornin'. Hear that racket across in the saloon? That's them. Gurney's been spendin' plenty of money on 'em. And he's gettin' 'em stirred up to do some devilment, you can be sure."

Gunsmoke picked up his old six-gun and squinted through the barrel. "That's like Bart Gurney," he said. "I reckon he has to be whittled down a peg. Nobody's goin' to interfere in this weddin'! Jim's a fine boy, and Lucinda is a fine girl, and if they want to get married it's their own business, and no Bart Gurney and his gang of hellions from his mine is goin' to pester 'em."

"What are you goin' to do, Gunsmoke? You're well past twenty-five now, remember."

"I ain't got paralysis or even rheumatism in my trigger finger, George. Eyesight's all right, too. But my gun's not the only weapon I've got."

"I'd sure hate to think of a nice girl like Lucinda Weller marryin' a polecat like Gurney," Balman said. "Gurney's goin' to pieces. Drinks too much and gambles too heavy. His little mine ain't producin' like it did. That's 'cause he's just driftin' along and not tryin' to open a new ore bed."

"So I learned at the county-seat on my way here," Gunsmoke replied. "That mine's a good one if it's handled right. Better'n the other Jim's superintendent of."

"You might as well know all of it, Gunsmoke," Balman said. "Don't get too blasted mad too quick and blow the roof off. You know Bart Gurney thinks he's boss of the camp. Well, I've had my orders from him."

"Such as what?"

"If Jim marries Lucinda, I'm to refuse to sell 'em groceries or anything else in the store. Gurney told me that. If I do sell 'em stuff, he'll ruin me, he says. My credit ain't any too strong, Gunsmoke. Surer'n blazes, Gurney will have the wholesale house cut me off and open a store himself and make everybody trade with him."

"Trouble with you, you give too much credit 'cause you feel sorry for folks. You can't afford it, George. How much would you need to make you feel easy and so you could tell Gurney to go to blazes?"

"Shucks! A thousand cash would set me right with the wholesale house."

"You go get your pen and ink bottle and a sheet of paper," Gunsmoke directed. "Write me a bill of sale. I'm stakin' you to two thousand for a half interest. I'll stay right here where I belong and help you run the store. Write her out! I've got bank drafts in my pocket."

"Gunsmoke! You're savin' my life. But two thousand for a half interest is too much."

A THOUGHTFUL gleam sparkled in Gunsmoke's eyes. "I know a business deal when I see one. We'll clear you with the wholesale house and keep what's left to buy and pay cash and take the discount. I'll show Bart Gurney who's boss of this town! I've got business interests here already."

"You have, Gunsmoke? What?"

"Stopped in the county-seat and learned a lot of things. Invested some money. But keep quiet about it now. I'm goin' to handle things in a certain way. Don't mention our deal yet. Get that writin' down!"

Balman hastened to obey. Gunsmoke bent over his old six-gun and began assembling it. When Balman returned, Gunsmoke read and signed the agreement, and dug into his pocket for an old wallet. He got out a couple of bank drafts and handed them to Balman.

"That's mor'n the correct amount, but we can fix it up later," Gunsmoke said. "You keep quiet about this, pardner."

"Gosh, Gunsmoke! I'd rather have you for a pardner than any man I know. Heard you'd made a lot of money!"

"Keep it quiet for the time bein', George."

Word had spread through the camp that Gunsmoke was back, and men began dropping into the store to shake hands with him. The news reached the saloon on the opposite side of the street. Bart Gurney heard it, and came across to enter the store.

Gurney was a huge man, uncouth, boisterous continually, the possessor of many bad qualities he made no effort to conceal. Arrogant and domineering, he made the men who worked for him hate him, but they hung on because they had livings to make.

He strode into the store as if he owned the place, came to a stop not far from the stove, and stood with his fists planted against his hips and a half-sneer on his lips as he looked down at Gunsmoke.

"If it ain't old Gunsmoke Morgan!" Gurney said. "Same old scarecrow! Heard a wild rumor that you'd struck it rich, but you sure don't look it."

Gunsmoke glanced up and eyed him for a moment, then bent his head without answering and went on working with the gun.

"Goin' out to shoot a couple of rabbits for your New Year's dinner?" Gurney asked, laughing.

Gunsmoke spoke. "Nope! I've got a special invite for New Year's dinner, and I'm bettin' it'll be a good one."

"Who invited you, Gunsmoke?"

Gunsmoke looked up at him, looked him straight in the eyes, and there was a menace in the look.

"As you perhaps know, Gurney," he replied, "my nephew, Jim, is gettin' married tonight to Miss Lucinda Weller. I've got an invite to eat New Year's dinner with 'em."

Gurney's face purpled. "If you're wise, you won't bank on that too much," he replied. "If you get another invite from somebody, take it. Then you won't go hungry."

"Oh, I reckon Lucinda won't let me go hungry," Gunsmoke said.

"She may be too fussed up to cook a dinner. Havin' her plans wrecked

always upsets a woman, I've heard tell."

"Lucinda ain't goin' to have any plans wrecked, as I know of. Gurney, I reckon you remember the old days when the camp was young, huh?"

"Suppose I do, Gunsmoke?"

"You remember how I got that nickname 'Gunsmoke?' Remember the time three hellions tried to jump a claim and I dealt with 'em? Remember the time a couple of men tried to rob Balman's store, and I happened in? If you've forgotten, go up the hillside and look at the cemetery when the snow melts."

"What's all this talk mean?" Gurney asked. He had lost some of his aggressiveness already.

"Don't bother me now," Gunsmoke ordered. "I'm right busy cleanin' and oilin' this old six-gun of mine. I've tried a lot of guns in my time, but never one that has this beat. She puts a bullet right where I want her to. Hit a man right between his eyes as easy—"

"Are you threatenin' me?" Gurney broke in.

GUNSMOKE shook his head. "Know any reason why I should threaten?" he asked. "You been doin' some devilment that'd cause me to get riled? If you have, Gurney, better not do any more from this minute."

"Why, you old scarecrow! Do you think you can come back to this camp and order me around? Tryin' to scare me, Gunsmoke? I've got plenty of men who'd handle you if I said the word."

"Maybe," Gunsmoke said. He squinted through the barrel of the old six-gun again, then began shoving shells into the chamber. He thrust the gun into the holster and practiced a couple of swift draws—and every man there saw that they were swift.

"Oh, I know what you're drivin at," Bart Gurney said. "I asked a certain girl to marry me, and she turned me down for your no-good nephew. He ain't got anything but wages as superintendent of a tiny hole in the ground. I could give her everything. I'm a mine owner."

"Are you?" Gunsmoke asked, looking straight at him again. "I've heard tell at the county-seat that you've been

[*Turn page*]

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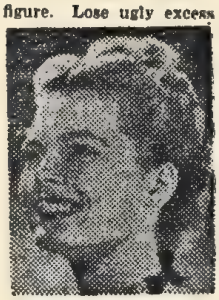

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gamblin' your mine away, and not working it to best advantage. You've got plasters all over your mine, and the bank's gettin' tired of carryin' 'em."

"You seem to know a lot."

"Yeah," Gunsmoke admitted. "Go on with your story."

"All right! Take it and like it! I don't intend to have any young whippersnapper like your nephew Jim make me look small. So I warned him and the girl that they'd better not get married. Maybe I can't stop the ceremony, but I can make things hot for 'em afterward."

"How?" Gunsmoke inquired. "I'd admire to hear."

"First, they can't buy a cent's worth in this store, and it's the only store in the camp. I've warned Balman, as he can tell you. If he sells or gives them anything, I'll make everybody stop tradin' here. I'll open a big new store and undersell him. Should have done it long ago—money in it. I'll make the wholesale house shut down on him. He's way behind with his bills there—"

"Shucks!" Gunsmoke interrupted. "You've been misinformed, Gurney. Next week, George Balman is goin' to the county-seat and pay up all his bills and buy a lot of new stock for cash."

"Pay up and buy stock with what?" Gurney asked, laughing.

"With money. That's the usual stuff you pay up with. He hasn't told you, Gurney, but I know it. George has sold a half interest for cash, and his new pardner can back him plenty. I reckon he'll be around here to sorta help handle things, too."

"New pardner? Who'd be fool enough to buy in a place like this?"

"A lot of men might. Good business proposition. You just said so yourself. But let's not talk about that. Let's talk of my nephew's weddin'."

"There won't be any, if him and the girl are wise."

"I was talkin' to him a short time ago, and he was intendin' to get married this evenin'. Don't reckon he's changed his mind."

"He'll be sorry if he doesn't change it. Jim's all right in his place, maybe, but I won't have a cub like him steppin' on

my toes. Matter of pride with me. The idea of that girl perferrin' him to me. I'm a mine owner."

"You are if you pay your mortgages before the first of February, Gurney, and that won't give you much time."

"What you mean?"

"I'm surprised you don't know as much about your own business as other folks know," Gunsmoke informed him. "The bank's sold all your notes. New owner might want to take charge of your mine."

"They wouldn't dare!"

"Well, you can sure enough find out easy enough. Go to the county-seat and see the banker. Now, Gurney, cuss it, let's stop talkin' about this stuff and get down to the weddin' business. I don't want you and your men pesterin' Jim and Lucinda either before or after the weddin'."

"Oh, you don't? And what'll you do about it?"

Gunsmoke smiled slightly. He stood and stiffened. And suddenly his right hand, shaped like a claw, darted downward and whipped gun from holster with a rapidity that was astounding.

"I've always kept in trim just for the heck of it," Gunsmoke explained.

"You're threatenin' me?"

"Yeah," Gunsmoke said. "If anything happens that distrubs me, I'll come lookin' for you, Gurney. Have to leave you now. Got to eat supper with Jim and then dress for the weddin'."

With grim deliberation, Gunsmoke put on his heavy coat and muffler and mittens. "I'll be seein' you later, George," he told the storekeeper. "Maybe we can drink the bride's health."

Gunsmoke strode to the door, opened it and passed out, and closed the door softly behind him. . . .

THROUGH the bright moonlight, Gunsmoke walked to the little log church with Jim. Both felt uncomfortable in stiff new clothes, Gunsmoke especially so. Before they reached the church, he had unfastened his muffler and was running a forefinger around his throat under his stiff collar.

"Bet I get cleared of this thing soon

[*Turn page*]

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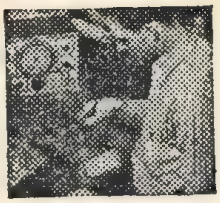

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as possible," he grumbled.

He had told Jim of the scene in the store. And he wore his gun and belt between his coat and short overcoat. Gunsmoke watched the shadows as they strode along, but saw nothing to arouse his alarm.

Most of the people in camp were in the church when they arrived, and were singing hymns. Gunsmoke met Lucinda, a happy, blushing bride-to-be who clung to Jim's hand a moment. She tiptoed to kiss Gunsmoke's wrinkled, leathery cheek, which disconcerted him more than a cowardly attack from ambush would have done.

Gunsmoke stood at the back of the little church and shook hands with a lot of people who had known him for years. But when the preacher from the county-seat announced the wedding ceremony, and Jim went forward with Lucinda, Gunsmoke slipped quickly out a side door for a swift look around.

He saw a group of men a short distance from the church. They were silent, and did not approach. Gunsmoke guessed they were some of Bart Gurney's men, who had been drinking free liquor all day and might have been promised certain rewards if they carried out Gurney's plans. He slipped back into the church quickly and saw his nephew married, got in line with the other men to kiss the bride, and then noticed that many of the visitors were nervous, and that Jim had an expression of worry in his face. Rumors had been flying around the camp all day that Gurney would cause trouble.

The watch party continued. Refreshments were served. The usual service was held as the hour of midnight approached. Children fell asleep and some of the adults were yawning.

The hour came. Blasts of gunfire and loud yells broke the silence of night outdoors. Those were the usual things, however, and attracted little attention. The preacher spoke to his congregation about the New Year and dismissed them.

Gunsmoke waited at the door. He had resumed his muffler and short overcoat,

and now he had his gunbelt buckled outside the overcoat, not caring who saw it. Jim and Lucinda stood near Gunsmoke receiving the congratulations of their friends.

George Balman and four of the oldtimers approached Gunsmoke, and Balman beckoned for him to step aside.

"Here's five of us, Gunsmoke," Balman whispered. "We're all packin' guns—"

"Thanks, but I ain't yearnin' for any help," Gunsmoke broke in. "You keep out of this so you can handle the store if anything bad happens to me—which it won't. But if it should, Jim's my only heir. Remember that."

People were streaming through the door and emerging into the bright moonlight. The night had turned colder. Gunsmoke whispered to Jim to keep inside until he returned. He went out boldly and stood beneath the flaring lamp fastened at the side of the church door. He could see the group of silent

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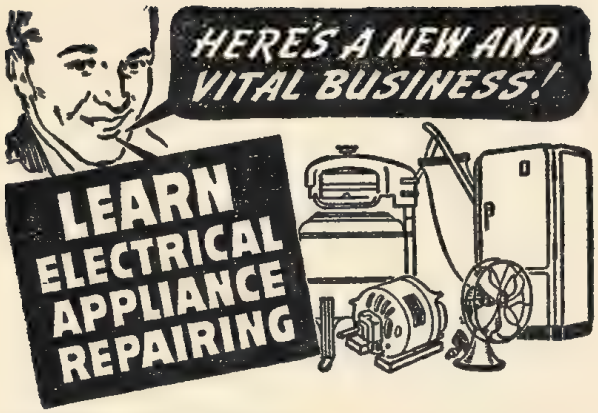

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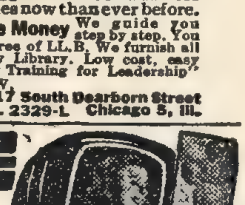

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men standing not far away, and they could see him.

"Bart Gurney!" Gunsmoke called. "Hey, Gurney! I've got an important message for you."

He strode toward the group for a short distance and stood waiting. Gurney came forward to meet him.

"What's the message, Gunsmoke?" he asked.

"I reckon it's in three parts, Gurney," Gunsmoke explained. "First—I'm Balman's new pardner. Second, I'm the man who bought up your notes. You can go on runnin' the mine and collectin' a small chunk of dividends, but you've got to settle down to business and run it right, or I'll kick you out and put Jim in as manager. That mine can make money if it's operated as it should be."

"Why, you—" Gurney began.

UP WENT one of Gunsmoke's hands in warning. "Hold it, Gurney! One wrong move, or even a single wrong word, and you're done in this camp. It's time for you to be decent. I'll be here to see that you are. Any time you don't like me, Gurney, buckle on a gun and come down the street and meet me, and we'll have a quick decision."

"That all?" Gurney asked.

"Not quite. You can check with the bank if you think I'm funnin'. Now, there's one more thing: Jim and Lucinda are married, and I don't aim to have 'em bothered. See that you don't bother 'em any or have your men do it."

"I ain't responsible for what my men do."

"Oh, yeah you are, to my way of thinkin'. You've been liquorin' 'em up free all day, and maybe you've promised 'em somethin' if they do devilment. You walk right over there and tell 'em you've changed your mind." Gunsmoke make a quick move, and Bart Gurney felt the muzzle of a gun pressing against his stomach. "March, Gurney! I ain't done my New Year's shootin' yet, and if by accident one of my bullets happens to hit you, nobody can blame me."

"Gunsmoke—"

"No talk, Gurney! You be decent, and you'll make a little outen your mine

yet. But stop tryin' to be the boss of the camp. I've come back to be that. It's no more'n right—the place is named for me."

He prodded Gurney with the muzzle of the gun, and not gently. Gurney turned and walked toward the group of silent men.

"No rough stuff tonight, boys," Gurney said. "Plans have been changed. I'll have a little present for each of you tomorrow. Get back to the mine after you have your New Year's spree."

Gunsmoke stood aside, and all could see the gun he held.

"And don't make the mistake of forgettin' the orders Mr. Gurney just gave you," he told them. " 'Cause I'll be around with this old gun of mine. Scatter, now!"

He turned his back upon them deliberately and strode back to the door of the church. Balman and the other old-timers were still waiting there.

"Come on, boys," Gunsmoke said. "We'll escort this happy bride and bridegroom to their cabin. We'll drink the bride's health there, and then we'll mosey down to the store and spend the night talkin' of old times. So we'll be up and dressed and ready for business in case any gents want to start a ruckus."

It is an item in the history of the camp that there was no ruckus.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 55

1. Lariat, lasso, and riata.
2. It began in May, 1854, swung north and encountered so many difficulties that it was broken up, most of the cattle being sold at St. Louis and other Missouri and Kansas markets.
3. Tapaderos are stirrup coverings which offer protection to the rider's feet from brush, biting horses, cactus, rocks, etc.
4. A hogan is the log house, chinked with mud and straw, used by the Navajo Indians. Built oval-shaped, that there be no corners in which evil spirits could lurk, it has a hole in the roof to allow smoke to escape.
5. A gaily colored blanket of Mexican make used for bedding, as a cape in cold weather, and to turn frightened cattle by waving it.

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 10)

This here Hitchin' Rail department ain't no authority on diseases o' cattle, no time, but I can tell you somethin' about shippin' fever from personal observation.

When you notice in yore feed lot some animal that refuses to eat, watch him. If the animal begins to look sick, with a watery discharge from eyes and nose, and saliva droppin' from the mouth, why he's mighty apt to have what the veterinary Docs call "Hemorrhagic septicemia," or shippin' fever. Then's when you start hollerin' for the Vet, the quicker the better.

Usually this disease, once it takes hold, is fatal. And it's as contagious as measles. But they vaccinate to prevent it, and also use a serum to treat the active disease.

Why it should be especially active durin' shippin' is a mystery that's hard to explain, but it's so, and the fact gives rise to the name "shippin' fever."

I once heard a Vet explain that in shippin' the animal's resistance is lowered due to abnormal conditions, and therefore the animal is much more apt to contract the disease than when feedin' on the home range.

Some stockmen make a practice o' not waterin' on the journey, so that the animal will have an extra fill in weight at the end o' the trip when the buyer looks him over jest after bein' watered. This, the Vet says, is a bad practice. Also gettin' over-heated, or cold durin' transportation. Year-old calves that have jest been weaned are especially susceptible to shippin' fever.

May yore cattle never get sick o' the fever, Tom, 'cause if they do it sure is gonna make you sweat. Healthy livestock and a rancher's prosperity sure go hand in hand.

Be seein' you, fellahs and gals, come next month.

Buck Benson

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

ON HER deathbed, Chee Klay's Navajo mother told him that he had not a drop of Indian blood in his veins. He was white. She had rescued him as a baby, raised him as her own son. Now he was a man grown,

and the new knowledge that by race he was alien to the Navajo tribe, among whom he had lived all his life, was a jolt. It changed his entire outlook.

He was white, so now he was going to live among the whites, be one of them. He had fiery red hair and freckles, and a fighting disposition—and fight he would have to, beyond doubt, for there were many and dangerous obstacles in his way.

There you have the situation in Clee Woods' fine novelet, NAVAJO NIGHT RIDERS, coming up in the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN. Chee Klay's personal problem was tough enough, but he was in the midst of a general situation packed with all sorts of menacing possibilities.

A man had only to look at the wild, desolate New Mexico range to know that anything could happen out there where the Navajo Indians with their sheep brushed up daily against the hard-driving white men with their cattle. It was called the Strip, a sort of no-man's land on the eastern edge of the vast Navajo reservation.

The big HZ ranch of old Robert Hazelett lay off there in the Strip. So did the Skull Ranch of K. K. Rudhill—and Rudhill, aided and abetted by his two renegade younger brothers, was trying to take range from both Hazelett and the Navajos. Hazelett was Chee's close friend, and Chee was not standing idly by while any flea-bitten coyotes like the Rudhills attacked him.

But when the truth came out, that Chee was white—well, then the trouble really began. For Chee had gone to an Indian school run by white men, and he never had subscribed to Medicine Man stuff—and so he had earned the deep hatred of Black Yazzi, who promptly aligned the tribe against

[*Turn page*]

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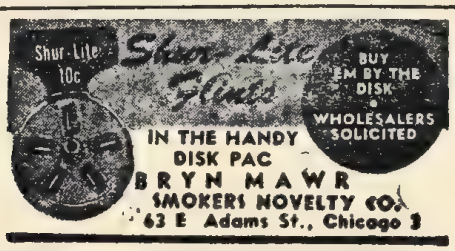

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Chee when the fact of his white origin came out.

Black Yazzi was leading a renegade band of Indians against Hazelett's herds, too. They nabbed Chee, and that was Black Yazzi's chance to find out what he really wanted to know—the location of the Eternal Cave from whence had come the rich turquoise beads that Chee wore in a necklace.

Only Chee's clan, the Beadwater people, knew where this ancient Eternal Cave was. Chee's mother had taken him there three years before, the last twenty miles by night. By candle light down in the mystic cave, Chee had stood in bewildered awe at the deep cysts of turquoise pendants and beads. Unestimated wealth among Navajos who would give a dozen sheep for a single ancient pendant.

For wealth like that, men have tortured and killed other men many times—and will again. But Black Yazzi had his own cute ideas as to how to make Chee talk, tell the location of the cave. Hazelett Chee's friend, figured in this, too. They were going to ruin the rancher, drive him out of the country.

And the Rudhills! When *they* learned about that treasure, they were ready to team up with Black Yazzi and the Navajos, or with the devil himself, to get their hands on the fabulous wealth contained in the mysterious, hidden cave. Chee was in a tough spot. But he had an ace up his sleeve. What it was is for you to read in NAVAJO NIGHT RIDERS, the exciting featured novelet in the next issue!

NAVAJO NIGHT RIDERS will put you off to a fast start, and you'll go on to the next item on the reading bill of fare. This time it's another of the popular Swap 'n' Whopper novelets, by Syl MacDowell, this one titled WILD MEN OF WALLOWA.

These two screwballs, as probably you know, can be depended on to get themselves into more assorted kinds of trouble in a minute than the average man could manage in a month. They are a lazy pair of galoots, and can spend more energy talking themselves out of work then it would take to do the job. Being rovers, and compelled to use their wits to feed their stomachs, they are naturally just skirting the rim of some kind of difficulty most of the time.

In WILD MEN OF WALLOWA, they get themselves all snarled up in a robbery plot, and for a while are grimly pursued hither and yon as a pair of dangerous bandits. It begins to look very much as if they would

shortly begin playing checkers with their noses, using the cross bars of the jail window for squares. To these ardent lovers of the free-and-easy life, this is an intolerable prospect.

But what to do. Well, here's what *you* do—just look forward to WILD MEN OF WALLOWA, and find out for yourself, and to your huge satisfaction, how Swap and Whopper solve another problem.

We could go on and tell you about other good stories in the issue, and about the departments and other features, but you can take our word for it there's a wealth of good reading in the next issue, every page worth while! Be on hand for a fiction feast!

LETTERS FROM READERS

AND now we come to the time and place where you take your pen in hand—or your pencil—or maybe it's your typewriter, or do you dictate to a secretary. Whichever it is, pals, have yourselves a good look at the letters and cards below sent in by readers of the magazine. And, if you have not yet written us, why don't you do it—right now? You'll have fun writing the letter, and we'll enjoy reading it.

This is the first time I have ever written an editor, but I wanted to tell you how much I like Walt Slade and his adventures. That fellow sure goes places and does things—the way we'd all like to do, I guess. Here's to El Halcon, and long may he live!—*Paul Crombie, Miami, Florida.*

Thank you very much, Paul. You're in a spot down there to have some adventures of your own, we should think—meaning deep sea fishing for the really big and fightin' ones.

[*Turn page*]

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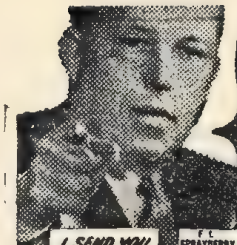

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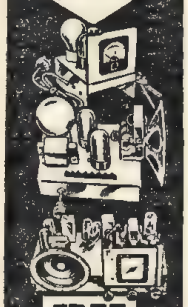

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Mebbe you do. Most of us could find a lot more adventure than we ever get, right where we live, if we'd just be on the alert for it.

How about more stories of the old gold mining days, in Alaska and California and the Yukon? Why does the whole book, and all the western books, for that matter, have to be about ranches and cowboys? They're fine, and I'll keep right on reading about them, but a change once in a while is fine, too.—*Marvin Emerson, Peoria, Ill.*

The various gold rushes have certainly provided material for some fine stories, Marvin, and we like 'em just as much as you do. But fine ones are hard to get, and we wouldn't want to unload any other kind on you. One of these days, though, you'll have your wish. Meantime, it just occurs to us that in another two years the thrilling saga of the Forty-Niners will be an even hundred years in history. The Alaskan rush—the Trail of '98—is not yet a half century gone.

I like your covers. Generally the pictures are worth framing by anyone that likes to think about the old West. Plenty of action, and lots of good color. The same goes for most of your stories—not all of them, though. I liked THE CHISOS DEVILS, by Bradford Scott, in the October issue. Scott is nearly always good, I think.—*Henry Sanderson, El Paso, Texas.*

Thanks for your compliment on our covers, Henry.

I am glad to see you are getting away from so much use of dialect in your book. I mean such things as "yuh" and "yore." Maybe the men of the old West didn't talk just like Bostonians, but I can't believe they warped the English language all out of shape, either. After all, they came from everywhere, and many of them were well educated, or at least fairly so.—*Evelyn Channing, Indianapolis, Ind.*

You are quite right, Evelyn. The population of the old West was a cross section of the population of the entire country, or nearly so—with some from foreign lands thrown in for good measure. Their talk was salty and different—or became so after they had been there a while.

We and our authors try to remember that, with individual differences determined by their origin and their education, they all

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talked like Americans. They *were* Americans, shaping the history of America.

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Watch, Bob, and you'll notice that the women and girls are present, more or less prominently, in many of our stories.

POWDERSMOKE LEGACY, in the October issue, was one fine yarn. Swap and Whopper were fun, too. And I like the short stories, especially THE GUNS OF KILDORE, by Harrison Hendryx.—*Rodney Bartlett, Portland, Maine.*

Thanks for those kind words, Rodney. We'll pass them along to the writers. And that, pals, is all for this time. But there's a next time comin' up, and we'll expect to hear from you. Just address The Editor, *Thrilling Western,* 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Adios, amigos, y muchas gracias.

—THE EDITOR.

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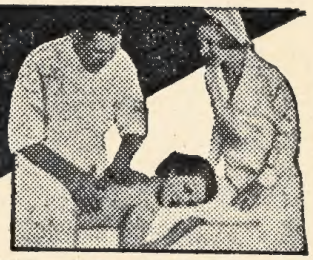

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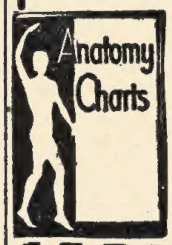

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